



Death's DAUGHTER AND THE Ebony BLADE

◆ MAITO
AYAMINE

◆ ILLUST.
CIERRA

III





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Characters

Kingdom of Fernest



**Claudia
Jung**

A proud knight who accompanies Olivia as her aide.



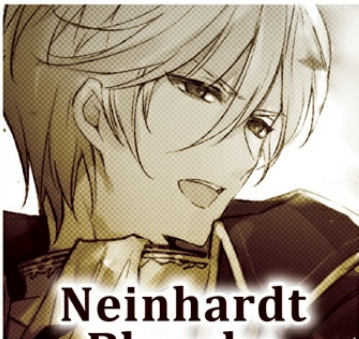
**Ashton
Senefelder**

Discovering his potential as a military tactician. A quick thinker.



**Olivia
Valedstorm**

A girl raised by a god of death. Innocent and full of curiosity.



**Neinhardt
Blanche**

Aide in the First Legion and Claudia's cousin.



**Lise
Prusse**

Blood's aide. An old friend of Claudia's from the military academy.



**Blood
Enfield**

The general at the head of the Second Legion. Though his rough manner sticks out, he is an adroit tactician and a first-rate swordsman.

**Paul
von Baltza**

The old general at the head of the Seventh Legion. Though known as the God of the Battlefield, he has a soft spot for Olivia.

**Otto
Steiner**

Paul's aide. Often ends up the victim of Olivia's whims.

**Katerina
Reinas**

Neinhardt's aide. Harbors a secret crush on Neinhardt, of which he is oblivious.

**Cornelius
vim Groening**

Renowned as the Invincible General. Supreme Commander of the First Legion.

**Alphonse
sem Gallmond**

The King of Fernest.

Asvelt Empire



**Felix
von Sieger**

One of the empire's Three Generals.
He commands the Azure Knights.



**Rosenmarie
von Berlietta**

One of the empire's Three Generals.
She commands the Crimson Knights.

**Gladden
von
Hildesheimer**

One of the empire's Three Generals.
He commands the Helios Knights.

Darmés Guski

Imperial Chancellor.
The emperor trusts him absolutely.

Holy Land of Mekia



**Sofitia
Hell Mekia**

She is seventh in the line of Seraphs,
the rulers of Mekia.



**Johann
Strider**

A Senior Thousand-Wing in the
Winged Crusaders. Though flippant and brazen,
he is a first-rate mage and swordsman.



**Amelia
Stolast**

A Thousand-Wing in the
Winged Crusaders.
She specialized in binding magecraft.

Lara Mira Crystal

Commander-in-chief of the Winged Crusaders.
Her loyalty to Sofitia is absolute.

Zephyr

A Senior Hundred-Wing who heads the owls,
Mekia's intelligence division.
Has a false eye of smokey quartz in his left eye socket.

Others

Z

The god of death that took in Olivia and raised her.
Disappeared one day without warning.

Xenia

Another god of death who works through Darmés...?



Death's Daughter
and the Ebony Blade

III

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Prologue: He Who Bore the Weight of the Crossed Azure Swords

I

Orsted, Capital of the Asvelt Empire

A fifteen-minute walk south from>Listelein Castle, seat of Emperor Ramza XIII, the imposing district—with its thick, towering stone walls ringed by a deeply hewed moat—came into view. Crossing the great drawbridge to the other side of those walls, however, revealed a different world altogether. There stood a fountain encircled by the statues of six black lions gushing crystal clear water, and many statues carved in the likenesses of the gods. Anyone who stood there couldn't help but be enchanted. Shops selling luxury goods and brightly colored mansions lined the streets of polished stone in neat rows that crossed through Nordrheim—the district of Orsted that allowed only the most elite of the Asvelt nobility to reside there.

Right in the center of the district was a grand estate, its garden blanketed by flowers as pure and cold as the driven snow—the rare winter rose. This estate, which everyone called the Winter Rose House, was owned by one of the Three Generals of the empire—the commander of the elite Azure Knights. This was the home of Felix von Sieger.

The year was Tempus Fugit 999 and winter was approaching. The veil of night settled over the Sieger estate, where the snow continued to cover everything in a blanket of white as it had since the early morning hours. Warm light filtered from the house's windows, casting a band of scarlet-tinged amber across the ground. From far above, the moon cast its light on the snow to make the whole landscape shine in dazzling silver. Silence reigned in this unspoiled world. Every now and then snow would spill out of a tree, only to be carried away on the breeze. It was like a dream.

Inside the manor, two people sat in the lavishly decorated dining room eating

dinner. The first, fine-featured and perfectly proportioned, was Felix. On the occasions where he appeared at balls or dinner parties, he set all the ladies of the nobility sighing and gazing at him with dreamy eyes without fail. The second was a young woman, with features just as beautiful as Felix's, though she was slighter in build. She had just celebrated her fourteenth birthday. Her name was Luna von Sieger, Felix's younger sister.

As they sat there directly opposite one another, Felix addressed her from across the table. "You seem unhappy, Sister. What troubles you?"

It was their first meal together in a long time, but Luna's face showed no joy. She had barely touched her food, her plate no different from when it was brought out. Her coloring was good, however, so Felix assumed it wasn't a problem of ill health. She kept her uneasy gaze fixed down at the table. That was generally a sign that she had something difficult to talk about. Felix sat watching her without a word until, at last, she appeared to gather her courage and looked up.

"I have something to ask you, Brother," she said.

"You can ask me anything," he replied, laying down his knife and fork softly on his plate. He dabbed at his mouth with his napkin, then gave her his undivided attention.

"Well, it's just..." she began. "Is it true that you're going away with the army again? You were away from home for such a long time last time too..."

Felix was silent for a moment. "Yes, it is true," he said at last. "Did Klau tell you that?"

Luna gave a small nod. Felix looked up to her right, to where the servants stood lined against the wall. His butler, a man with a spectacular white beard who went by the name of Klau Zerenade, lowered his head with grace. Felix couldn't fault the man. He hadn't given any particular instructions for it to be kept secret, and he had planned to broach the subject after dinner tonight anyway.

"When shall I see you home again?" Luna asked in a voice so small it threatened to fade away altogether.

Felix held back a bitter smile and beckoned her to his side. Running a hand through her silky black hair, he said, “My duties will keep me away for a while this time. I think at least two months—”

“Two months?!” Luna gasped the moment the words left his mouth. Her blue-green eyes, which she had inherited from their parents, immediately overflowed with tears.

Felix and Luna’s parents had been taken from them too soon. They died after contracting a grievous illness, leaving the then fourteen-year-old Felix to head the House of Sieger. From that day on, he had committed himself without reservation to fulfilling the role of parent to Luna, who was only seven at the time. He thought that Luna had understood and accepted their unhappy circumstances as well as a child her age could. She had never once made a selfish request of him. It was this that had Felix so tormented now. He would face off against any enemy without fear, no matter how strong or how fearsome, but a single tear from his little sister left him helpless. Even he could see how pathetic it was. Rosenmarie and the others would find it utterly hilarious if they ever found out.

But she’s my little sister, he thought. *My one and only, irreplaceable little sister.* He gently brushed away the crystalline teardrops that spilled down her cheeks with his fingers, then clasped her delicate, snow-white hands in his own.

“Luna, let’s go out together tomorrow,” he said. “It’s been so long since we went anywhere together.”

“Go...out?” she replied, her voice quivering. Felix gave a big nod.

“That’s right. How about...” He thought for a moment, then said, “A walk around Lake Essna should be lovely at this time of year.” The destination he had in mind was a lake in the forest to the west of Orsted. It was famed for its waters, which shifted in hue with the changing seasons. Clear blue in the spring, flaming scarlet in the summer, and a deep, vibrant green in autumn. Now that it was winter, the lake would be at its most beautiful, changing to a deep ultramarine blue.

Luna, perhaps imagining the beautiful lake, allowed herself a tiny smile. It only lasted a moment, however, before her pale pink lips tightened once more.

“My idea does not please you?” Felix asked. Luna shook her head.

“No, of course it does!” she replied. “It sounds simply wonderful. I only... What of your work?”

“Oh, they can spare me for a day,” Felix said confidently, placing his hand over his heart. In truth, he knew that he had no time for lakefront strolls. He had orders from Marshal Gladden to take over command of the Crimson Knights while Rosenmarie recovered from her injuries. In fact, he was due to depart for Fort Astora, where the Crimson Knights were currently based, the day after tomorrow. He had much to do before then. Fortunately, Felix had an eminently capable aide at his side in Second Lieutenant Teresa. It pained him horribly to foist his military duties onto her, but he was also reassured that she would keep their preparations on schedule.

“Are you sure?” Luna asked timidly, looking up at him. Felix pulled his chair back, then knelt down before her. He put his right hand to his heart, and said with exaggerated solemnity, “I could never speak falsely to you, my princess. A fool such as myself must always disappoint you as a brother, yet still I dare to hope you would honor me with your company tomorrow.”

“Oh, stop it,” said Luna. Her face brightened, a ray of light shining through the darkness that had hung over her, and Felix smiled warmly back at her.

“I’m going up to my room, Brother,” Luna announced after they finished their dinner. “Maria, be sure to prepare lunch for the two of us to take out tomorrow.”

“Of course, Miss Luna. I shall make sure it is ready.” Maria Castolla, another of the servants, gave a gracious bow.

“Oh, I need to pick out what to wear tomorrow,” Luna exclaimed.

“I know you’re excited, Luna, but don’t stay up all night,” Felix said.

“Yes, Brother.” She gave a small curtsy, then bounded from the dining room. Her face was alight with happiness, as though her tears before had never been.

Felix waited until he was sure she was gone before he made his way to the parlor that joined the dining room, sighing as he went. He sat down in front of

the fireplace, sinking deep into the sofa.

“A great many things weigh on you, Master Felix,” said Klau, placing a teacup before him on the nearby table. Felix smiled guiltily.

“Perhaps I was a little indulgent,” he admitted.

“‘A little’ is rather an understatement, Master Felix,” Klau replied. “You couldn’t have been more overindulgent if you’d downed an entire bottle of cloud peach wine.” Felix recalled the time he had requested that Klau acquire him a bottle of the then-fashionable cloud peach wine. The butler had flatly refused. *I assure you, Master, that beverage will not be to your taste*, he had said.

“‘Couldn’t have been more overindulgent’?” he repeated. “Rather direct, aren’t we?”

“Yes, Master Felix. However, in my opinion it is a good quality of yours. I’m sure Miss Luna will remember tomorrow fondly,” Klau said with an air of superiority, rocking his powerful frame back on his heels. Of the many servants in Felix’s household, Klau, the head butler, was the only one who spoke frankly to him.

Within the hierarchy of the Asvelt Empire, the two of them stood worlds apart. In the ninth century of Tempus Fugit, a piece of legislation called the Katyana Code, named for its author, established the system of rank within the empire’s borders. It drew the strongest distinction between the commoner class and the nobility of any country in Duvedirica. Since Ramza ascended the throne, class-based strictures on lifestyle had relaxed, but the residential districts were still entirely segregated. All this meant that Felix and Klau were strictly bound to the role of master and servant. No stranger listening in on the conversation would bat an eye if Felix were to discipline Klau after this conversation. Felix, however, drew comfort from their relationship, and so was lenient with the man. Klau had served the Sieger family faithfully for three generations and continued to do so unfalteringly, though he was already well over sixty years old. To Felix, who had his role as head of the family thrust upon him at a young age, Klau had taken the place of a parent, always standing quietly by to show him the correct path. He had nothing but gratitude for the

man, and there was nothing he wished less than to see him punished.

“Fond memories, you say...” Felix murmured, taking a long sip of his steaming hausen tea. “I’m sure she’d be much happier going with her beau than me, though.” Klau gave him a sharp look, narrowing his eyes and shaking his head. “What?” Felix stared at him. “Surely you’re not telling me she doesn’t have one?” He was aware that it probably betrayed his own naivety, but he imagined fourteen-year-old girls as in love with the idea of being in love. While Luna was mature for her age, he hadn’t thought she would be the exception.

“There’s nothing extraordinary about it. I’m surprised you needed to ask,” Klau said, as though this were obvious. This naturally touched a nerve in Felix. As her brother, he couldn’t be totally objective, but he thought Luna was a fine-looking girl, and he had ensured she received all the education expected of a noble lady. Klau’s reaction was, therefore, wholly unacceptable to him.

“Are you suggesting that Luna is not a desirable young lady?”

“Nothing of the sort, Master Felix.”

“Then what do you mean by it?” he demanded hotly.

Klau exhaled through his nose, then adjusting his posture, said, “If I may speak plainly, it is because there is no one Miss Luna will entertain the idea of romance with. That is entirely your fault, Master Felix.”

“My fault?” Felix exclaimed, taken aback. He asked for clarification, but Klau only reconfirmed what he had already said. *What could this failing of mine be?* he wondered desperately, at a loss for how to interpret the butler’s words.

Klau heaved a deep and theatrical sigh. “Do you not see it, Master Felix? She has *you* at her side—brother or not, other men must pale in comparison. That is, if she pays them any mind at all.” He finished by dabbing at his eyes and added, “You have truly done her a wickedness, Master Felix.” Incidentally, he hadn’t actually shed a single tear. Felix, who hadn’t expected the conversation to go this way at all, only gaped at him.

“That can’t be true, surely,” he said weakly. Luna was currently enrolled in the Imperial Mondblum Institute, the school where most of the children of the higher echelons of nobility were educated. He knew that their rank in no way

guaranteed they were *all* of superior talent, but some of them would go on to decide the future of the empire. Many of the most senior officers in the imperial army were also said to be graduates of the academy. There had to be at least one amongst them who could capture Luna's heart. Felix insisted as much to Klau, but the butler only smiled sadly at him.

At last, as though to head off any more protest from Felix, Klau leaned abruptly toward him with a deep frown. "Your greatest failing, Master Felix," he said gravely, "is your total inability to appreciate how desirable you are. You can protest all you like, but that is a plain, indisputable fact." Cowed by this intensity, Felix nodded twice, his expression strained. Klau appeared satisfied as he stood up straight again. "Forgive me, Master Felix. It's not befitting for one my age to be getting so worked up."

"Oh, no, think nothing of it. More importantly, while I'm away, I'm counting on you to keep the household running," Felix said. The conversation had ended up in a strange place, and he changed the subject as much to get back to safer waters as anything else.

"Of course, Master Felix. Miss Luna and everything else are in safe hands," Klau said. He paused, then said, "I still can't believe it, though. First the defeat of the Southern Area Army, but now the Crimson Knights on top of that?" The friendly atmosphere from earlier was gone; Klau's face was hard.

"There is no army in all recorded history that has gone undefeated," Felix replied. "Though I do not deny it was a shock." Privately, however, he wondered, *Can the Seventh Legion's victory really be called shocking when they have Death God Olivia on their side?*

"You're right of course, Master Felix..." Klau said. "But you don't think Fernest will seize this as an opportunity to invade the empire itself, do you?"

"At this juncture, I believe the chances of that are low, but I cannot rule it out entirely. That is, after all, what takes me to Fort Astora." There were only two plausible routes the royal army could take if they wanted to invade the empire. The first was to advance north through the kingdom's central lands. The problem was that this necessitated traversing several regions of steep and mountainous terrain, making it ill-suited for moving an army. Furthermore, the

central lands were always under Gladden's watchful eye. From his base at Kier Fortress, he maintained the greatest force in the imperial army, the famed Helios Knights chief amongst them. It was, therefore, realistically impossible for the royal army to pass through the central region.

That left the second route. The Royal Army's only option was to breach the defense at Fort Astora, the stronghold built along Fernest's northern border with the empire. However, from what the military inspectors had told Felix, the Seventh Legion's forces were greatly diminished. Breaking the Crimson Knights probably had their morale running high, but morale alone would not win a war. They would be hard-pressed enough to manage the land they had reclaimed, and that would create logistical problems. By Felix's estimate, it would be three months before they were ready to advance on Fort Astora, two at an absolute minimum.

If the Seventh Legion does lay siege to Fort Astora, it'll mean meeting Death God Olivia in battle, he thought. *Do I really have it in me to fight her off, I wonder?* Snow like cotton wool began to drift down once more. Felix sat staring deep into the flames that shivered in the hearth, the girl's delicate face in his mind's eye.

Chapter One: Mayhem at Fort Astora!

I

Fis, Royal Capital of Fernest

Decked out in a soft dusting of snow, the royal capital of Fis was alive with such festivities as had not been seen there in many a year. Young women danced skillfully to the upbeat rhythm of drums and flutes around the statue of Julius zu Fernest, the first king of Fernest, that stood at the center of the oval Sain Jerim Plaza. Their light, suggestive skirts swayed around them, sometimes shifting to reveal the dancers' voluptuous thighs. Each time this happened, the men in the audience erupted into raucous cheers. The traditional lion dance of Fernest had long been passed down through the ages.

"Here now, here now!" called a dashing young man in a headband. "Dancing's all fine and good but be sure you don't miss a chance to sample Fis's famous lion orbs! Today only, I'll throw in two for free for seven a pack!" He brandished a skewer of grilled lion orbs as he spoke.

"I've got bracelets with the lions and seven stars! They're in short supply so get in quick to snap one up!" a woman shouted, holding up her arm to show off the bracelet on her wrist.

Merchants packed every inch of the plaza with their stalls, spiritedly promoting their wares to the shoppers who thronged the streets. The occasion that had Sain Jerim Plaza in such a state of excitement was none other than the news of the Seventh Legion's success in taking back the south, then the northern lands. Minstrels had already composed odes in honor of the victories to entertain the passersby. The threat of the empire that loomed over Fernest had not dissipated, however, and while the capital celebrated, the Second Legion remained locked in a bitter struggle on the central front. As though in a bid to avert their eyes from this reality, the people gorged themselves on the thrill of this fleeting victory, becoming drunk on the triumph...

Brigadier General Neinhardt, aide to the commander of the First Legion, looked back and called, “Are you coming, Lieutenant Katerina?”

“Y-Yes, ser!” Second Lieutenant Katerina Reinas replied, hurrying after Neinhardt as he set off, steering clear of the crowds. They had happened upon the festivities while en route to the palace.

“It really is a festival, isn’t it? It sort of reminds me of the Lion Orb Festival,” Katerina said. The Lion Orb Festival celebrated Fernest’s founding. Before the war, it was put on in magnificent style every year in Fis, but with the nation embroiled in the struggle against the empire, it hadn’t been held in some time.

Katerina kept glancing back as though something was tugging at her from behind, apparently wanting to get a look at the festivities in the plaza. They seemed to be really getting into the swing of things, with people joining the dancing girls for the lion dance.

“You’re welcome to go dance with them, if you want,” Neinhardt said.

“What?! Why, I’m sure I don’t know what you mean, ser!” Katerina’s face went slack for a second, then her cheeks flushed bright scarlet. Neinhardt wasn’t sure what to make of that.

“What I mean is neither here nor there. It’s obvious you want to go dance with those girls,” he said. “I hear that troupe is famous in Fis. I don’t mind waiting for you for a dance.” Before his eyes, Katerina’s cheeks swelled.

“Oh, yes, I see,” she replied, “My apologies, ser. I was foolish, a silly fool to get my hopes up. I promise I have no interest in dancing. Let’s get on to the palace.”

“Are you sure? If it’s your job you’re worried about—”

“Quite sure, ser!” Katerina shouted. She strode past Neinhardt and off toward the palace. Two women standing nearby who had overheard their conversation whispered to each other. For some reason they shot him dirty looks afterward.

“Was it the stalls she wanted to visit?” Neinhardt muttered to himself. He continued on after Katerina, who had already vanished out of sight.

Neinhardt’s Workroom at Leticia Castle

Lord Neinhardt is so dense, Katerina thought to herself as she went around Neinhardt's workroom, pushing aside curtains and throwing open the windows. Her eyes fell on a mirror that rested on a shelf, and she smiled at her reflection. *I don't see any problems there. Perhaps my hair's a little plain...* As she thought this, gathering her hair up into a single bunch, a bone-chilling wind passed across the back of her neck. Tucking her chin into her collar, she quickly shut the windows she'd just opened.

"Brrr..." She shivered. "That's probably enough ventilation." Telling herself she wasn't slacking off, she went and crouched down by the fire, hugging herself tightly. She reached for the jar to one side of the hearth, took out a flint, and hurried to get the fire going. She stayed there for a while, huddled up like a turtle, until she heard the sound of the door opening.

"You took your time, ser," she said after a moment.

"*You* were too fast," Neinhardt retorted at once, throwing his coat unceremoniously over the sofa. He sat down at his desk and immediately began poring over a towering pile of reports. It was as though the episode at Sain Jerim Plaza was already long forgotten.

I bet he doesn't even understand why I was angry... Katerina thought despondently as she returned his coat to its proper place before sitting down at her own desk. She followed Neinhardt's example, taking a pile of papers in hand and beginning to read.

The room was silent for a while, until Katerina, without thinking, exclaimed, "Oh!" Neinhardt looked at her over the top of a report document.

"Is there a problem?" he asked. She didn't reply, only held out the page to him. Neinhardt took it dubiously, running his eyes over the contents.

"A request for an audience?" he read. "Lieutenant Claudia and Major Olivia are coming to the capital?"

"Apparently, ser. I wonder what they want?" Katerina knew who Claudia Jung was. Second in the 175th graduating class at the Royal Military Academy, Neinhardt's cousin, and heir to the House of Jung, a line famed for the many great knights it had produced. Claudia herself was a knight, and was said to be very handsome. And joining her would be the bright young talent feared

throughout the imperial army as a death god: Olivia Valedstorm. The pair of them were famous, in a sense, and it therefore surprised Katerina that they would come seeking an audience.

“Who knows?” Neinhardt replied. “Now, about today’s—”

“Your schedule for today, my lord, is so tightly packed there’s not even room to cook a goose.”

Neinhardt stared at her. “A goose?”

“I beg your pardon, ser. I meant, not even room to swing a cat,” she corrected herself, forcing a laugh before Neinhardt could say anything else.

He was quiet for a moment, then asked, “Is there nothing we can shift?”

“Nothing at all, ser.”

“As aide, making these things work is your—”

“I can’t do the impossible, ser,” Katerina said, not giving Neinhardt any ground. This wasn’t some petty revenge for Sain Jerim Plaza. Even before his promotion to Brigadier General after the Battle of Ilys, Neinhardt had always been busy, and it had only gotten worse. These days, it wasn’t unusual for his days to be packed with appointments right down to the minute.

“It’s no small thing to have them specifically request an audience with me,” Neinhardt said eventually. “Lieutenant Katerina, I know you won’t disappoint me.” Katerina knew that tone of voice meant Neinhardt wasn’t backing down. It was one of the things she had learned over their long acquaintance serving as his aide.

She sighed. “Very well. I will put off your inspection of the southern quarter of the city we had scheduled for two this afternoon until another day. If I schedule the audience for that time, will that suit you, ser?”

“Yes, good,” Neinhardt replied, then added, “I’m sorry for always doing this to you, Lieutenant.”

“Not at all, ser. I’ll go and notify them of the change.” Neinhardt made an affirming noise, then turned his gaze back to his reports. Katerina noted down the new appointment in the notebook she had taken out of her pocket, all the

while stealing glances at Neinhardt.

He always gets that oh-so-sweet smile on his face at times like these. It's seriously not fair, she thought. Even so, part of her felt pleased as she reached for the doorknob.

Three hours later, Katerina began, “My lord, they should be arriving—” but before she could finish, there came a brisk knock at the door. Neinhardt called out permission to enter, and the door opened to reveal Olivia, cradling a large wooden box under her arm. From beside Neinhardt, Katerina let out an exclamation of surprise, her face incredulous. She had probably imagined Olivia, the death god who struck fear into the empire, a little differently. Neinhardt, who had reacted the exact same way when he first encountered Olivia, felt a particular sense of closeness to his aide. After Olivia came Claudia, looking as prim as ever. Olivia didn’t bother with any greetings, but came up to the desk and set down the wooden box with a thud.

Neinhardt looked at it, then back at Olivia. “What...is this?” He asked.

“A present for you, Mr. Fi—um, Brigadier General Neinhardt!” Olivia said, smiling brightly.

Neinhardt frowned without meaning to. There was no end to the stream of conniving individuals who came seeking to bribe him with what they called “gifts,” concerned only with their own advancement even as the nation stood knee-deep in troubles. They came from all walks of life, from mere merchants all the way up to nobles. Ever since his advancement to the lowest rank of general officer, their number had only increased, and Neinhardt was sick of it. But he knew full well that Olivia didn’t harbor those sorts of ambitions. His overwhelming impression was she showed little interest in anything unrelated to food. As such, Neinhardt found himself curious as to what she might have brought him.

“May I open it?” he asked.

“Of course, ser!” Olivia seemed unable to stand still, she was so eager for him to open the box. Neinhardt lifted the lid.

“Fish...?” The box was stuffed full of beautiful, shining, dark-gray fish. Closer

inspection told him they were sallow, a river fish. Their eyes were clear, so it couldn't have been long since they were caught.

As Neinhardt sat there unable to conceal his bemusement at the unexpected present, Olivia piped up. "It wasn't easy, but I caught them myself, ser!" she announced proudly. An atmosphere of bafflement settled over the workroom. It took Katerina clearing her throat for Neinhardt to recall himself.

"Are you good at fishing, Major Olivia?" he inquired hastily, then immediately regretted asking something so irrelevant.



That wasn't what he really wanted to know at all. He took a sip of his steaming hot tea to calm his nerves.

"Just average. I'm self-taught, after all," Olivia replied.

"You...you don't say?"

"You love fish, right, ser?"

"Well..." Neinhardt said hesitantly, "I suppose I do like fish, yes." He did prefer fish over other meat, if he had to choose. The sallow Olivia had brought him were in season at the moment, and looked nice and plump. They'd probably be delicious fried up. That wasn't the point, though. *I don't remember ever telling Major Olivia that I'm partial to fish...* he thought. Obviously, it hadn't come up at their first meeting in the command room at Galia Fortress, and they hadn't touched on the topic when he met with her to express his gratitude on behalf of General Florenz. They had crossed paths regularly at Fort Caspar, but he didn't remember ever exchanging more than a passing word with her.

Could she have heard it from Claudia? he wondered. These days there was a clearly defined sense of distance between Claudia and himself, but they were close in age and had been close as children. He remembered Claudia rampaging after him, wooden sword in hand, as though it were yesterday. After spending time with Claudia, it wasn't so unexpected that Olivia might know his likes and dislikes. He looked to Olivia's left to where Claudia stood. She was looking down, her shoulders shaking.

"Lieutenant Claudia," he said.

"You called?" she replied, looking up with the same prim expression as before.

"Was it you who told Major Olivia?"

Claudia was silent for a moment. "It sounds like you may be laboring under a slight misunderstanding, cousin," she said at length. "Your likes and dislikes are outside my area of expertise. This thoughtful gift is entirely Major Olivia's doing. I hope it is to your liking." She looked down, her shoulders quivering again. Neinhardt recognized that this conversation was going nowhere, so decided to set it aside for the moment.

“Now, what brought you here all of a sudden?” he asked. “It’s unusual for you to ask to see me.”

“It’s Major Olivia who wanted to see you,” Claudia replied. “I’m merely accompanying her. She has something she very much wants to request of you.”

“A request? For me?” He looked back at Olivia, just as the girl abruptly leaned in to bring her face up to his. Her eyes glimmered. She gave off an intensity that made Katerina recoil unconsciously.

“I want to go to the library!” Olivia announced. “Can I? Can I?”

“I—what? The library?” Neinhardt repeated, lost. Olivia’s words, as usual, were nothing like what he’d expected.

Katerina whispered in his ear, “I think she might want your recommendation.” Neinhardt already understood that much, however. What he didn’t know was *why* she might want to get into the Royal Library right now. He asked for an explanation but got only a half-hearted reply from Olivia that skirted the point. Claudia cut in in her stead and started to go through the whole story.

“So that’s it...” he said when she was done. “Understood. I won’t ask what’s got you so hung up on the house name you inherited, but I will contact the library on your behalf.” He looked at Katerina, who, understanding his meaning immediately, got up and left the room.

“So, like, can I go to the library now?” Olivia began, then corrected herself. “Um, I mean, may I now go to the library, ser?” There was something uncharacteristically fearful in her expression.

“Yes, you may,” he replied.

“Really?”

“Yes, really. As I told you before, you avenged my friend Florenz. Ever since then, I’ve wanted to do something for you to express my gratitude, so this is perfect. Also,” he added, “given your military record, Major, it’s really not even a question.” There was in fact an arduous application process one had to go through to gain entry to the library, but it was only thanks to the Seventh Legion’s victories that they were even able to consider such banalities—and Olivia had been at the very core of that success. Neinhardt had no reservations

about exercising his authority here.

“Thank you!” Olivia gushed. “I mean, thank you, *ser*. And Claudia, thank you too!” She hugged Claudia’s arm, an enormous smile on her face.

Claudia, looking put-upon but still smiling, muttered, “I guess I don’t get to wring any necks.”

II

La Chaim Palace in Elsphere, capital of Mekia

The Holy City of Elsphere was encircled by two white walls and boasted jade-green roofs, beautiful in their uniformity. Looking down over it all towered the vast La Chaim palace, with eight outer towers gathered around a central spire. Taking advantage of Mekia’s immense output of rare minerals, La Chaim palace was constructed from the hardest of all stones, commonly known by the misleading name “black glass.” Though traded to foreign nations at exorbitant prices, here it was used with no regard for moderation so that the palace also functioned as a sturdy fortress. The common folk called the castle unassailable.

Deep within there was a beautiful garden, decked out in a medley of different flowers. A statue of the goddess Strecia stood in the center, carved from yet another rare mineral—blue quartz.

Just when I thought I couldn’t find you anywhere, you show up here... thought Lara Mira Crystal. As she entered the garden, her eyes landed on a figure sat at a neat little round table, gracefully sipping a cup of tea while surrounded by fluttering butterflies drawn to the scent of the flowers. With a small sigh, Lara strode over to the table.

“My Seraph,” she said.

“Dear, dear. You finally caught me,” replied Sofitia Hell Mekia, ruler of the Holy Land of Mekia. Her shoulders slumped like a child caught in a prank.

“I have not ‘caught’ you. You wandered off without even your personal guard. I beseech you to think a little more of how irreplaceable you are, my Seraph.” Lara turned to look daggers at the ladies-in-waiting. Highly distressed, they all looked down in terror. Some were even trembling. They knew, of course, that

one word from Lara and their heads would roll.

“I made them let me,” Sofitia said. “Don’t be too harsh on them.”

“But—”

“More importantly, it’s such a beautiful, tranquil day today. Why don’t you join me for a cup of tea, Lara?” Sofitia tilted her teacup and smiled. A breeze that carried a hint of a chill brushed through her lilac hair.

“Thank you kindly for the offer, my Seraph. I should be glad for a cup.” To sit together with the Seraph was a dire offense, but Sofitia despised it when anyone did anything more than the absolute minimum of ceremony. Lara accepted her offer without protest, sitting down on a chair pulled out for her by a still-terrified lady-in-waiting. Another immediately poured her a cup of tea with trembling hands. The fresh aroma of the tea leaves coiled up with the steam to tickle Lara’s nose. Meanwhile, Sofitia ordered another servant to bring more cakes.

“Now,” she said when she turned back to Lara, “what brings you here today? You seem quite out of sorts.” Her tone was playful.

“I hope you will excuse the impertinence, but I wish to know why you ordered Amelia to carry out your plan,” Lara said. “Even without Lady Berlietta, this is still the Crimson Knights we’re talking about. Most humbly, I have to question whether her abilities are sufficient...” Amelia had only recently been promoted to thousand-wing. She was clever and talented enough, but she lacked firm experience. There was every chance that if she met with a situation outside her predictions, she wouldn’t be able to adapt. That was why Lara had insisted that she be the one to go instead.

“I appreciate your concerns...” Sofitia said. “However, I think you do her a disservice in your assessment of her.”

“A disservice?”

“Indeed. You are measuring her against yourself, are you not?” Sofitia set her teacup down soundlessly and looked directly at Lara.

Confused, Lara turned the question over in her mind. She wasn’t sure enough of herself to simply shoot back that it wasn’t true. On more than one occasion

she'd found herself, just as Sofitia said, sighing over how good-for-nothing her officers were compared with herself.

"You may be right, my Seraph," she admitted. Sofitia smiled gently.

"I agree that unlike you, Amelia is hardly a host unto herself. She is young, and thus still has much to learn. But despite all that, I am not worried in the slightest. It is not for nothing that she attained the rank of thousand-wing."

Ranks within Mekia's army went as thus, from lowest to highest: guardian, ten-wing, senior ten-wing, hundred-wing, senior hundred-wing, thousand-wing, senior thousand-wing, and finally blessed wing. Those who graduated from Mekia's sole military academy, the Saint Endymion School, began as ten-wings if they were commoners, or hundred-wings if they came from noble stock. In order to reach the rank of thousand-wing, the requirements were rather different. Excellence was of course demanded, but the ability to use magecraft was also a nonnegotiable requirement. In other words, the ranks of thousand-wing, senior thousand-wing, and blessed wing were all synonymous with "mage." There were very few who possessed the power to make them eligible, however, and most of them allowed their mana to run out of control and died in infancy. Krishna Halbert, the Bishop of Artemiana Cathedral that stood as the founding institution of the Holy Illuminatus Church, had despaired of the poor stock born over the past decade. This was yet another reason that the mages were Mekia's secret weapon.

Lara processed Sofitia's words before she next spoke. "Very well," she said. "As one upon whom is bestowed the rank of blessed wing despite my own inadequacies, I shall not question your decision any further." She rose quickly from her chair, then knelt before Sofitia.

"I do understand your concern, Lara," said Sofitia. "However, our objective here is to reduce the Crimson Knights' military capabilities. We are not looking to claim new territory. Such a task is within Amelia's capabilities. Besides..." Sofitia's words cut off, and silence fell over the garden.

Lara slowly raised her head and saw that Sofitia wore a terrible smile. She swallowed unconsciously to moisten her dry throat, then asked hesitantly, "What is it, my Seraph?"

Sofitia laughed softly. “Besides, that smile of hers is at its most beautiful on the battlefield.”

The Imperial Army, before the gates of Fort Astora

Late that night, two men stood before the gate at Fort Astora. One of the two, named Deryck, was hunched over and shuffling his feet restlessly.

“Oi, the next shift should’ve come by ages ago,” he said loudly, apparently at last reaching the end of his tether. “I’m freezing my ass off here.” Meanwhile, Kyle, a middle-aged man holding a spear under his arm, looked over at the gatehouse.

“It’s the cold,” he said. “I bet they’re all stuck to the fireplace.”

Deryck clicked his tongue. “Yeah, I bet they are,” he said, shooting a glance at the gatehouse before letting out another noise of intense frustration. They had been assigned to the night watch because they were veteran soldiers among the Crimson Knights, but even so...

“Huh?”

Deryck stared intently out into the darkness, the tension in his voice apparent. “Hey, I heard something. And it’s getting closer.” One of the reasons Deryck was on the night watch was his preternaturally good hearing. Kyle raised his spear and focused on the darkness before them with utmost vigilance. Eventually, he heard the rustling of grass being pushed aside just as a figure in a hooded white cloak emerged.

“A woman? Oi, that’s a woman, isn’t it?” Deryck said stupidly, his demeanor changing abruptly. Fort Astora had been built in preparation for the oncoming war with Fernest, so there were no towns or villages nearby. It was unusual, therefore, for there to be anyone around other than themselves, woman or otherwise. Kyle kept one eye on the woman as he surveyed their surroundings, never letting his guard down. There was no sign of anyone else.

“Hey girlie, what’re you doing out here?” Deryck called. Without replying, she approached, moving like a ghost. There was definitely something off about her.

“Oi, stay back!” Kyle bellowed to try and head her off. Guyel had given them strict orders to allow no one near the gates, not even a child.

“This is your last warning. If you come any closer—” Deryck stepped forward, then drew the sword at his waist. A glance at his face was all it took to know that this was no mere threat. Yet the woman continued to make her way toward them.

“The broad’s got guts,” said Deryck, a ferocious glint in his eyes. He raised his sword high above his head. A few steps before coming into range of his blade, the woman suddenly pitched forward and fell.

“Huh. She collapsed.”

“Guess so...” Deryck and Kylie shared a glance, then they both walked over toward the woman. Kylie warily checked her vitals, as Deryck craned his neck over his shoulder to peer at her.

“She’s not dead, is she?” he asked.

“No, she’s breathing. Looks like she just fainted.”

Deryck scoffed. “Looking at her now, I guess she really couldn’t hear us at all before, huh?” He returned his sword to its scabbard with a sour expression, then kicked a pebble at his feet. The clatter as it rolled away seemed to weave through the darkness around them.

“Now, take a look at this cloak,” Kylie said. Though at first glance the cloak appeared ordinary, close inspection revealed it to be woven from high-quality cloth. Layer upon layer of delicate embroidery ran from the sleeves up to the shoulders.

“This silver wing pattern...” Deryck said, looking nervous. “Do you think she’s from the Illuminatus church, then?”

“Most likely,” Kylie replied, his expression just as tense. “And unless I’m much mistaken, she’s of high rank.”

“I agree. So? What are we going to do?”

“Damned if I know...” If she were just an ordinary believer, they could have just left her out here. But if she really was of high rank, that would lead to problems. The Church was powerful. If they pretended not to have seen her, the woman would undoubtedly freeze to death, and if then it somehow came

to light that they'd abandoned her, he could well imagine the trouble they'd be in for.

As Kylie deliberated over whether to report her to his superior officer, the girl let out a faint groan and rolled over so that she was facing up. This revealed her enticing, snow-white thighs, and Kylie heard Deryck swallow loudly from behind him.

"Hey..." he said warningly. "I'm sure I don't need to say it, but don't get any funny ideas. She's an important person from the Church." Up close, it was clear how incredibly beautiful she was, and Deryck's weakness for women was well known.

"Oh, y-yeah. Of course," Deryck muttered, though he continued to leer at the woman's exposed thighs. While they spoke, it appeared the girl had regained consciousness properly. She shook her head vigorously, trying to stand. Her hood fell back, and her pale blue hair fell around her face.

"Whoa, whoa there! You all right?" Kylie called out in alarm as she looked like she might collapse again. She blinked several times, then exhaled as though in relief. It looked like she'd grasped what had happened.

"M-My apologies. I'm afraid I have troubled you," she said haltingly.

"No, not at all..." Kylie replied. "But what were you doing out here?" The woman explained that she was from a group of pilgrims that had been attacked by bandits. She had fled in desperation after watching her companions murdered before her eyes, running until she arrived here. It seemed as she spoke that the terror of the experience returned to her. She was trembling.

"You've suffered a lot," Kylie said.

"Yes..." she replied. "Tell me, did any of the others escape and make their way here?"

Kylie shook his head, looking away so he didn't have to see her pleading eyes. It would be cruel to say it to her face, but making a pilgrimage in the middle of the night was stark raving madness. The bandits probably saw them as a once-in-a-lifetime prize. Not only was he stunned by the pilgrims' stupidity, he also couldn't find an ounce of sympathy for them.

"There's been no one," he said bluntly.

The woman, apparently not ready to give up, pressed him. "It's really only me?"

"Yeah. Sorry, but it's just you."

"I...I see." Her disappointment was obvious. She leaned forward, leaning her cheek against Kyle's chest. He smelled her sweet, feminine scent and felt his masculine urges flare up.

Damn, this is tough, he thought, trying to hold himself in check.

Deryck pouted. "Why couldn't she have fallen into *my* arms?" he muttered. He looked thoroughly displeased.

"Now, don't you worry," Kyle said to the woman. "What matters is you're here now, where no bandits can get at you. Unless they've got the balls to defy the Crimson Knights, that is!" He roared with laughter.

"So you are the famed Crimson Knights..." the woman said. "When I ran here I was thinking only of escape. It seems I was very lucky." She gazed at him with such strong feeling that Kyle felt his ears grow suddenly hot.

"Well, um, that's right. I'm afraid I can't let you into the fort, but at least drink this and let yourself calm down a bit." He took the flask from his belt and handed it to the woman. She thanked him, then began to gulp down the water.

"How's that then? Feeling better?" he asked.

"Yes, thank you," she replied, giving him a small smile.

"Well, that's good to hear..." he said, then added, "Now I think of it, we haven't introduced ourselves. I'm Kyle, and this degenerate beside me is Deryck."

"Who're you calling 'degenerate'!" Deryck snapped, then gave a snort of indignation. The woman, having drawn away from Kyle, slowly stood up. She bowed courteously to them.

"How rude of me to not even offer my name after you were so kind as to rescue me when my life was in danger. I am called Amelia. I..." She paused, then said, "I would like to do something to express my gratitude."

“Oh, no, we don’t need—”

“Please, look here,” Amelia said, cutting Kylie off. She held out her hands as though she were cupping water in her palms. Kylie, unthinking, looked as instructed and saw a pale blue flame suddenly flare into life.

“H-How are your hands burning?!” he cried.

“Y-You...You’re a mage?!” Deryck spluttered.

As the two men stared at her in shock, Amelia said softly, “Both of you, be calm. There’s nothing to fear.”

“How can we be calm?!”

“Just look into the flames... That’s right... Don’t rush... Look closer...” Kylie felt as though Amelia’s words filled up every corner of his body, penetrating right down to his heart. He felt his awareness growing dimmer, and saw Deryck’s enraptured face beside him, a string of drool hanging from his mouth.

“Isn’t the fire beautiful?” Amelia said.

“Yeh... issuh...”

“Suh... beau...utiful...”

The howl of a beast cut through the night. A smile like a crescent moon spread across Amelia’s face.



III

Guyel's Workroom at Fort Astora

"Colonel, you need to rest. I don't mean to presume above my station, but you are working too much." Guyel's attendant Vim set the empty teacup on a tray while looking at Guyel, worry clear in his eyes. Guyel looked over at the grandfather clock and saw that the hour hand already pointed to midnight. He laid down his pen and sighed deeply.

"I have no choice," he replied. "I'm the supreme commander, even if I'm only standing in. I don't want her ladyship coming back to find her affairs a mess and laying into me about it." He laughed, a little self-deprecatingly. Vim immediately shook his head.

"Excuse me, ser, but I can't imagine Lady Rosenmarie would say such a thing. On the contrary, you could hardly face her if you work yourself so hard you collapse. Please, ser, you must take better care of yourself." Vim bowed as low as was physically possible, and Guyel recognized they weren't going to reach an agreement here. He thanked the attendant for his concern, then stood up slowly.

"All right," he said at last, "I suppose I can allow myself a short break."

"Not short, ser," Vim replied. "You ought to take a proper rest." He opened the door wide and saluted as though to hurry Guyel along. Privately amused, Guyel made his way back to his quarters.

"What's all that noise..." Guyel had only been asleep for a moment when he was roused by the sound of many footsteps running back and forth out in the corridor. Soldiers rushing about at this hour of the night could only mean trouble.

"Something's happened," he said to himself, then leapt out of bed and quickly pulled on his uniform. Just then, a pale-faced guard came barreling into the room.

"What's going on?" Guyel demanded.

“It’s...It’s a surprise attack, ser!” the guard replied. Guyel’s eyebrows shot up. He had expected the Seventh Legion to move on the fort, and had thus given strict orders to the watch on the gates to not to let their guards down for a moment. Hearing now that despite this they had allowed a surprise attack to slip their notice, he felt his blood boil with rage.

“Our enemy is the Seventh Legion, then?” he asked, fighting to keep calm.

“No, ser!” the guard cried out, spittle flying. “It’s the army of some other nation!”

“Another nation...?!” Such a possibility hadn’t even crossed Guyel’s mind, and his face twisted in horror. Four years had passed since the war to unify Duvedirica began. There were no longer any nations other than Fernest who defied the empire, and it was predicted that in a few years unification would be achieved. Yet here was a guard telling him that an unknown army had launched a surprise attack on Fort Astora. For a moment, his mind went to the jewel of the south, the United City-States of Sutherland—but they had made a secret alliance with the empire. It didn’t make sense.

Whoever it is, there can be no doubt that the Crimson Knights’ defeat sparked the inspiration that brought them here, Guyel thought. His shoulders felt heavy as though they were weighed down with lead.

“What’s our current situation?” he asked.

“W-We’re... I...” the guard stammered, their eyes flicking about the room. It was glaringly apparent that something terrible was happening.

“You’re not telling me we’re losing?” he asked. A surprise attack was one thing, but this was only the army of some unknown nation—nothing like the Seventh Legion and its death god. He hadn’t even considered that the Crimson Knights could be *losing*, but the guard’s reaction was more than sufficient to make him question that certainty.

“We are, ser. The enemy has already penetrated the fort. The battle has descended into chaos...”

“Eh...?! Impossible! How could you allow them in so easily?!” The gates of Fort Astora were made from black glass, the hardest of all stone. Even if they’d

used siege weapons like a battering ram, they couldn't have gotten through in a single night.

"The reports are so confused, ser, I can't tell if there's truth to them..." the guard said. They then went on to explain the situation. Guyel couldn't believe what he was hearing. The guards on the gate had killed all the soldiers in the gatehouse before breaking the bolt on the gate and leaving the fort wide open. If that were true, the question of how the siege had been won so easily was answered, and yet...

"You mean to tell me that imperial soldiers, proud warriors of the Crimson Knights, turned traitor?"

The guard, wiping sweat from their brow, nodded. "Yes, ser. Based on what's happened, we can say with reasonable certainty that they were collaborating with the enemy."

Collaborators. Guyel stood slack-jawed, scarcely able to believe what he was hearing.

The guard, looking like what came next was even harder to say, went on, "And about those watchmen, ser, they... The unnatural power and speed with which they moved... It wasn't human..."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Seasoned warriors tried to stop their rampage, s-ser, but they were so easily slaughtered... It was as though the traitors had transformed into wild beasts." Guyel felt like he was losing his mind. He could no longer make any sense of what was being said to him.

"We await your orders, Colonel Guyel," said the guard, stepping toward Guyel with a look of desperation. As much to calm himself as anything, Guyel tapped them lightly on the shoulder.

"I need to get a look at the situation myself first," he said. "Then I'll decide what to do." He went to where his sword rested at the side of his bed, swiftly fastened it to his belt, then set off from his room at a brisk pace.

As soon as the gates to the fort were flung open, all the Winged Crusaders

surged through. The shock of being betrayed by their comrades combined with the surprise attack threw the Crimson Knights into chaos. Amelia, the architect of it all, cut down around ten of them. Then, as their blood congealed on her blade, she slowly ran her tongue down its length.

“Pah,” she scoffed. “These are the Crimson Knights? In the end, they’re just savages. Savages that ought to have stayed holed up in their mountains where they belong.” She was looking out over the two armies as their swords clashed furiously when a Mekian soldier came running over to her. The badge at their collar marked them as a ten-wing.

“The surprise attack went perfectly, Thousand-Wing Amelia,” they said. “Our forces are pushing forward with an overwhelming advantage.”

There was a pause before Amelia replied. “I can see that for myself. Did you need something?”

“Yes, ser!” the ten-wing said. “Our secondary objective of locating their food stores has been accomplished!” Amelia ran her fingers through her hair.

“Then set it alight. I want every scrap of food burnt. If anything is missed...” She paused. “You know what happens then.”

“Yes, ser!” said the ten-wing, raising two fingers in salute. Amelia watched as they dashed away again, slowly raising her left hand into the air. The cerulean mage circle tattooed on her palm flashed repeatedly with blazing light.

“My sweet puppets must be reaching their limits by now,” she said to herself. With one last glance at the bellowing soldiers, she headed deeper into the fort alone.

Guyel left his quarters and headed for the watchtower. He ran up the spiral staircase and at last beheld the furious battle just as the first rays of dawn reached out across the land.

“So that’s our attacker...”

“Yes, ser.”

“It’s true, then. I don’t know those colors. Where did they come from?” he

wondered aloud. The soldiers of the mysterious army all wore armor of vivid leaf green with triangular purple sashes tied at their waists. At the very least, they weren't an army from any of the empire's vassal states.

"The ones raging there in the center of it all are the spies I told you about," said the guard, holding out a spyglass. Guyel took it and looked in the direction he'd been told. He immediately sighted a man wildly brandishing a pike and shouting something.

"There?"

"Yes, ser. The other will be somewhere nearby, if he isn't dead yet." Searching with the spyglass, Guyel saw a man straddle another soldier before ripping their throat out with his teeth. There could be no doubt that the man was out of his mind.

"I see, he really is a beast... Eh?" Guyel, suddenly gripped by a sense of unease, directed the spyglass down and to the right. There, he saw a woman with pale blue hair strolling through the clashing armies heading toward the fort. She wore pure white armor and a resplendent purple cloak. The thought that she must be their commander had only just occurred to him when his attention was caught by something strange about her left hand. It shone with blue light from some unknown source. Guyel lowered the spyglass, rubbed his eyes, then looked again, but this produced no change in what he saw.

What's that flashing blue light...? he thought. *No, it couldn't be!* He remembered a past conversation he'd had with Rosenmarie.

"No matter what, mages always have a mage circle tattooed into their palm. Felix says it glows when they use magecraft," she'd told him.

"So if I see such a glow, I can safely assume that person is a mage?" he'd asked.

"Yeah... Although, I mean, I was only half listening to what Felix said. I couldn't care less about mages."

The phenomenon he witnessed now matched perfectly with the identifier Rosenmarie had described. He resisted the urge to gulp in fear in front of the other soldier.

“Make sure this reaches all the troops,” he said. “Our enemy may have caught us unawares, but they are few in number. We have the clear advantage in position. Crush them, for the honor of the Crimson Knights.”

“Yes, ser!”

“You have my orders.”

“Huh?!” The guard cried out in alarm from behind him, calling him back. “Wait, Colonel Guyel! Where are you going?!” Ignoring them, Guyel leapt down the spiral staircase.

Amelia made it into the fort without the slightest bit of difficulty. She kicked down every door in her path, then cut down all the Crimson Knights who came running out to challenge her.

“So this must be the barracks,” she said to herself. “In which case, I suppose I need to go farther in?” She shook the ichor from her blade as she continued down the corridor, past the mounds of corpses and pooling blood. Once past the barracks, she noticed the entrance to another tower across from her, and she stopped.

“You really scurry about like mice...” she muttered, looking over at the men who stood across the entrance, blocking her path. From how they carried themselves, she guessed they were a step up from the sorry excuses for soldiers she’d killed so far.

“Well, well. Someone of importance has come out to see me,” she said, then pointed to the man who stood in the center, glaring over at her. “That white hair and gray eyes—do I have the honor of addressing Colonel Guyel Neurath?”

His eyes went wide with shock. “How do you know my name?!” he demanded.

As the other Crimson Knights drew their swords with violence in their eyes, Amelia replied casually, “Oh, it’s not just your name. Let’s see...” she continued. “I also know, for example, that you live in Orsted with your beautiful wife and adorable twin daughters.”

“How... How could you know all that...?!” Guyel gasped, the blood draining

from his face. Amelia wondered how much more shocked he would be if she told him about the new life growing in his wife's belly.

"There is nothing the owls cannot find out," she said.

"Owls...?" Guyel repeated. "Where in the hells' name are you from?"

"We are from the Holy Land of Mekia. It is a pleasure to make your acquaintance," Amelia replied, giving him the truth without any attempt at concealment.

"Mekia?" Guyel said slowly. "That's the land to the west, where the founding church of the Holy Illuminatus faith is located, isn't it?"

"You are correct. It is a glorious land, blessed by the goddess Strecia."

"I don't understand. Why would you tell me that so easily?" Guyel said, looking at her questioningly. She'd answered what he asked her, and now he was asking why she'd answered? Amelia cocked her head, confused by his response.

"The point of your question is unclear to me," she replied. "Did I err in answering with the truth?"

"After the empire hears about this, do you think Mekia will be left alone? Your tiny land will be snuffed out in a heartbeat."

"Oh, I see what you mean. You needn't worry about that—the Holy Land of Mekia isn't so feeble that it would lose to the empire," she said. "And besides, you're not going to be able to tell anyone what you heard here."

Guyel was quiet for a moment. "She's a mage, for sure," he said at last. "Be on your guard." At his words, the Crimson Knights all charged at Amelia. There were six of them, including Guyel. Amelia licked her lips, then held her left hand out toward them. She concentrated the mana in her body, and cerulean light poured out from the geometric lines of her mage circle.

"C-Colonel Guyel?! My...my body?!" wailed one of the crimson knights.

"What the...?! Why can't I move?!"

"D-Damn you! What the hell did you do to us?!" As they cried out in panic, Amelia watched with pity in her eyes.

“Yet again, your questions are all very dull,” she said. “Weren’t you listening to Colonel Guyel’s warning? I am a mage.” They could no longer respond, so she went on. “Mages use magecraft. It should have been blindingly obvious what I would do.” She walked up to the soldiers she had frozen with *Bonds of Immovability*, then, one by one, she went around and stabbed them in the heart. Their faces contorted with fear until at last they cried out in despair as the life went out of them.

Amelia finished with the others, then turned to Guyel. “Now then, only Colonel Guyel remains...” she said, then stopped. “Well, I never. Are you still moving?”

Guyel grunted with effort. “You...You won’t get away with this, you...”

“Have you undertaken some basic training yourself, then?” she asked. As she spoke, Guyel was struggling against her, trying to draw his sword. His will to fight was as strong as ever. Amelia found the sight quite touching. She leaned in to bring her mouth to his ear, and whispered, “I’ll make sure to just miss any vital points. I imagine you will have five minutes or so before you die. Think of this as a small gesture of thanks for cutting down the time I had to spend searching for you.” She slowly snaked her left hand around Guyel’s waist, then pulled him toward her as though in an embrace. As she did so, she plunged her blade into the center of his chest. She enjoyed the sensation of flesh rending apart and saw the tip of her blade peek out from his back. Guyel’s pupils dilated, and his body shuddered convulsively. But he didn’t make a sound.

“You didn’t scream like your men. That does you credit. I suppose as Lady Berlietta’s aide, I should have expected nothing less?”

“My lady...” Guyel gasped. “Forgi...”

“Goodbye, Colonel Guyel. May the blessings of Strecia go with you.”

IV

The Lianna Plateau, eastern Asvelt Empire

Felix, entrusted with command of the Crimson Knights, headed straight for Fort Astora with fifty soldiers under him.

“Ahhh,” he sighed. “It feels good to sleep outdoors every now and then.” He stretched his arms out, looking out at the glow of the sunrise. Quiet laughter came from behind him, and he turned to find his aide, Second Lieutenant Teresa, smiling at him.

“Did I say something amusing?” he asked.

“No, ser. I was only thinking how you really come to life when you get away from your desk.” She held out a cup of hausen tea for him. Felix thanked her as he accepted it, then took one sip, followed by another. The warmth spread through him, thawing his frozen body, and he sighed with pleasure.

“Is it brewed to your liking, ser?” Teresa asked, scrutinizing him.

“This tastes far better than any of the hausen tea I usually drink,” he replied, gazing at the steam that coiled lazily up from the teacup.

“I’m glad to hear it. I actually added a few drops of honey today, to bring out the aroma.” She smiled, brushing away her shoulder-length hair. Something about that struck Felix as odd, then he immediately realized what.

“You have your hair down today. That’s rare, isn’t it?” The Teresa Felix was always used to keep her blonde hair neatly tied back. This might be the first time he’d seen her with it loose. He noted with amazement how much a simple thing like hair could change one’s impression of a person.

Teresa chuckled. “*Rare*, you say. I didn’t expect that from you, my lord. I hope we’re not in for rain. Or snow, even.” She made a show of looking up at the sky.

“Is it really so unexpected?”

“Oh, well, I don’t know,” Teresa replied, smiling in a way that suggested deeper meaning. Before Felix could interrogate her further, she said, “I’ll have your breakfast ready at once, ser,” and promptly departed.

By the eighth hour, the sun was fully risen, and Felix’s procession was approaching Fort Astora, the horse’s hooves clattering along the road. Teresa’s joking premonitions of rain and snow had not come to pass, and the cold that bit at his cheeks grew less harsh.

“My lord, we’ve almost arrived at the fort,” Teresa said from where she rode beside him. Felix was about to reply when the faint smell of something burning reached him.

“That smell...”

“Is something the matter, ser?”

“Give the order to halt,” he said. Teresa nodded promptly. She extended her right arm to one side, then called out to the soldiers following them.

“All troops, halt!” At her command, they brought their horses to a stop, manipulating their reins with superb control. Felix called out for them to stay on alert, then raised his spyglass to look ahead.

“Ser? Is there something wrong?” asked Captain Matthew, leader of Felix’s personal guard. He rode up to them with his hand on the pommel of his sword.

Felix was silent for a long moment. “I think something may have happened to Fort Astora.” It was faint, but through the spyglass he could see white smoke rising from the fort. Beside him, Teresa scrambled to get her own spyglass from her belt. She pointed it up at the fort, and Felix heard her intake of breath.

“You’re right. There’s smoke coming from the direction of the fort,” she said. “You don’t think they were attacked by the Seventh Legion?!” There was a stir throughout the soldiers behind them. Amongst the voices, Felix heard the words “Death God Olivia” exchanged. Her renown had spread even within the Azure Knights.

“No, it’s too soon for them to have mounted an attack. I think that highly unlikely,” he replied, dismissing Teresa’s fears. He explained his reasoning to the other soldiers.

Matthew took it in before replying. “That makes sense. You’re right. It will take them time to put things in order in the lands they reclaimed. I agree with Lord Felix that the Seventh Legion can’t have moved out yet.” He crossed his arms, staring thoughtfully at the ground.

“Then what’s that smoke?” Teresa asked. Felix didn’t have any clear answer he could give her.

“I don’t know,” he said. “I sincerely hope that there is nothing amiss, but...” He paused. “I have a bad feeling about this.”

“And good or bad, Lord Felix’s hunches are always right,” Matthew said, scratching his head.

“Let’s just get to the fort quickly,” Felix said. He gave the order to move out, digging his feet into his stirrups. With a powerful kick his faithful horse Vermilion raced swiftly forward.

It was midday.

“My lord...” Teresa said, gazing about them warily, her eyebrows knitted together.

“Yes, I know.”

Ever since they left the succession of winding roads up the mountain and started up the sloping path that led to the gates of Fort Astora, the wind had carried the stomach-churning stench of blood. Felix knew it well—it was the stench of battle.

Teresa gave a hand signal to the soldiers behind them, and they regrouped into an arrowhead formation around Felix. The formation generated the power needed to drive deep into enemy ranks, and when utilized by the Azure Knights it functioned as a single, merciless lance. At last, the ruined gates came into view. Felix spotted soldiers in leaf green armor. They seemed to notice him too, because they suddenly sprang into motion.

“My lord! That is not the armor of Fernest’s Royal Army!”

“So I see. We will attack at once. Second Lieutenant Teresa, keep as close to me as you can.”

“Yes, ser!” she replied.

Felix gave the order for a volley of arrows to be shot at the enemy soldiers, who were now trying to get into formation. His elite soldiers loosed their arrows without a moment’s delay, letting them rain down and pierce through the enemy soldiers as though some force drew them to their marks. Felix

nocked three arrows to his bow then loosed them at once. The formation charged forward, forcing their way through the gate. He caught sight of a man about to give the finishing blow to a soldier in crimson armor. In the same moment, he drew the dagger strapped to his saddle and threw it.

“Wha...?” The man’s face went blank with shock; then he swayed and fell to the ground.

“You bastard!” shouted another enemy soldier.

“I’ll get him!” called another. The two soldiers dived at Felix as he leapt from Vermilion’s saddle mid-gallop.

One to the crown of the head. One to the side. Felix twisted gracefully to avoid the incoming blades, then drew their eyes where he wanted them so that he could alter their trajectories and make them strike at each other. The next moment:

“Gwuh?”

“Egh?”

The two soldiers impaled on one another’s swords looked at each other, uncomprehending, then crumpled to the ground. The soldiers around them stared in even greater confusion.

“What just happened?! Why did they stab each other?!” cried one.

“Blue armor...” said another. “Could these be the Azure Knights?!”

“The Azure Knights?! The most elite warriors in the imperial army?!” The enemy soldiers immediately began to clamor. Felix held out a hand to the soldier from the Crimson Knights, who sat on the ground with their mouth wide open.

“Are you all right?” he asked. The soldier nodded, then took his hand.

“L-Lord Felix... Lord Felix!” they repeated, calling out his name in a voice thick with emotion. Drawn by this cry, the eyes around them all turned to Felix.

“It’s Lord Felix!”

“Lord Felix has come to save us!” A roar of celebration rose up from the

Crimson Knights. Feeling their admiring eyes on him, Felix ordered the soldiers to explain what had happened.

“So it was spies. That was how they were able to get through the gates without resistance...” he said when they were finished. “I think I’ve grasped the situation for now. Now, where is Colonel Guyel?”

“Colonel Guyel is—”

“If you want Colonel Guyel, here he is!” called a woman’s voice, cutting off the Crimson Knight’s reply. Felix looked toward the entrance to the fort, where the voice had come from, and saw a woman in pure white armor step out from the darkness.

“Colonel Guyel...” he gasped, unconsciously gripping the hilt of his sword. Horribly changed, Guyel’s head dangled from the woman’s hand. Teresa turned away, unable to look.

“I suppose this is what you might call a touching reunion?” she said, tossing the head roughly toward them. It rolled through the mud to come to rest, cruelly, at Felix’s feet. Felix kept his eyes on her while laying a hand on Teresa’s shoulder.

“Forgive me,” he said to her. “I take back what I said earlier. I can’t have you at my side for this.”

“Yes, ser...” Teresa replied, but she didn’t move an inch. Felix gave her a small smile.

“You don’t have to worry about me,” he said, then turned to Matthew. “Captain Matthew. She is under your protection.”

“Yes, ser! I won’t let you down, ser!” Matthew replied, thumping his chest. Felix turned away from Teresa’s anxious gaze; then he walked toward the woman. She followed suit. Her expression was inhumanly empty. At the point where their swords might reach the other, they stopped. Up close, the first thing Felix noticed about the woman was her ice-cold eyes.

“Am I correct in assuming that you are the commander here?” he asked.

“You are,” she said, then held up one slender finger. “Will you also answer a

question for me?”

“If it is within my power to do so.”

“Back there, they were all calling you Felix. Does that mean I am speaking with General Felix von Sieger, one of the empire’s Three Generals?”

Felix paused, then said, “Yes, that’s right.”

“I appreciate you answering me.”

“May I also have your name?”

She paused before she announced, “I am Amelia Stolast.” As she drew her sword, her empty expression changed. Now she wore a grotesque smile.

V

“I suppose this is what they mean when they describe an opportunity falling into your lap,” Amelia said. There was a note of exhilaration in her voice as she took a big step toward Felix. Her blade glowed bright as she swung it at his neck.

She’s quick, Felix thought, leaping back and narrowly avoiding the blow by a hair’s breadth. *And that strange glow—I wonder if the blade is enchanted. The light makes it hard to judge the distance...* From her position, Amelia gasped.

“I didn’t think you’d be able to dodge my *Thin Ice* strike at this range,” she remarked. Apparently, she hadn’t expected to miss. “I put close to everything I had into that attack, and that’s no exaggeration. I suppose I should have known better than to underestimate one of the Three Generals.” Despite what she said, she didn’t seem the slightest bit worried. On the contrary, Felix thought he glimpsed something like enjoyment. He knew that opponents who acted like this always had some ace hidden up their sleeves. That would explain why she sounded so relaxed.

“Now, what shall we do next?” Amelia said. She swung her sword around a few times, as if to check her own technique, then brought it level to a ready position once more. In an instant, she dropped low to the ground, then sprang forward to stab at Felix, lightning quick.

That was even faster than the last time... Felix kept his cool, deliberately stepping forward at the last moment. Surprise flashed over Amelia's face. As the tip of her sword came hurtling straight at his heart, he turned side-on to avoid it. Then, just as Amelia passed him, he struck out with his left fist to hit the pressure point just below her armpit.

"Ngh!" Her face contorted with pain as she stumbled back. Then she collected herself with a chuckle. "So you dodged *Ice Fang* too. And punching a lady like that... You're too pretty to be so ruthless. Such are the consequences of war, I suppose."

Felix frowned at the smirk that pulled at her mouth. "Do you really find battle so entertaining?" he asked.

"Not when it's just anyone, I assure you. They have to be skilled enough to match me," she replied. "That goes for battle *and* for pleasure," she added as an afterthought. Her mouth stretched in an uncanny smile as she slowly extended her left hand, but the moment Felix saw her move, he pulled out the knife in his belt and hurled it. It whistled through the air, finding its mark to embed itself in her outstretched hand, drawing a little moan from her.

"Ugh..." she muttered. "I should have been more careful. You worked out that I'm a mage, then?" The joy in her expression was gone now. Sweat beaded on her forehead as she ripped the knife from her palm.

"I did," Felix replied. "We have a mage of our own in the empire, though she's a bit of an eccentric." From the emperor's mage, Felix had learned that all mages had a circle tattooed into the back of their left hand. The mage had explained that the meridians along which mana flowed through the body all terminated at a point called the nidus in the left hand. Thus magecraft would always stem from that point. Before activating a spell, it was also necessary to "charge" it for a length of time, depending on the power of the spell. Just knowing that much made it easy enough for Felix to interrupt a mage before they could use their powers.

"The empire has its own mage..." Amelia murmured. "This is the first I've ever heard of one."

"There is no reason you would have. She grew tired of the wider world and

now lives a life of seclusion,” Felix told her. In accordance with the mage’s own wishes, only a select few knew the location of her hideaway. It was also enchanted with a barrier that prevented any ordinary person from reaching it, even if one knew its location. Felix thought he was probably the only one who *could* reach it.

“I don’t have the slightest interest in imperial mages,” Amelia said dismissively, “but it makes sense now how you were able to predict my attacks. You ought to be helpless before me right now.”

“I’m not so sure about that,” Felix said. “Magecraft isn’t as all-powerful as you say.”

“Isn’t all-powerful’?” Amelia said with a mocking smile. “That is a bold thing to say when facing a mage. I wield the power of the goddess.” She took out a fresh white rag and wrapped it quickly around her left hand, crimson quickly spreading and staining where it soaked through the cloth.

“You call it the goddess’s power, do you?”

“You take issue with that?” Amelia asked, raising her eyebrows slightly.

“I do acknowledge that magecraft goes beyond human understanding. But that doesn’t mean it has no limits; consider the fact that with every spell comes a corresponding risk to the wielder.”

Amelia peered at him, wary for the first time since their encounter began. “You are very knowledgeable,” she admitted. Felix released the clasp on the hilt of his blade, drawing it smoothly from its scabbard. It was a longsword bequeathed to him by Emperor Ramza himself, one that bore the name God Slayer.

“I know enough,” he said. “Now, if you don’t mind, I think it’s my turn.” Felix squared off against Amelia as she extended her bloodstained hand toward once more. He kicked off the ground to close the distance between them faster than blinking. Amelia flinched as though startled, but hopped away to one side. Felix jumped after her, slashing his sword in an upward diagonal swipe. Amelia swiftly raised her own sword to parry, but was unable to withstand the force of his blow. She went flying, crashing into the ground in a cloud of dirt.



“Wha...What was that?” she gasped, coughing violently. “No one can move like that...” She stood up shakily, roughly wiping away the blood that trickled from the corner of her mouth. “It can’t be that you’re a mage as well?”

Nothing was further from the truth. “I can’t use magecraft at all,” Felix responded matter-of-factly. “That was physical skill, plain and simple.”

“Just physical skill? The speed with which you moved was practically superhuman,” Amelia said, staring at him with disbelief.

Felix nodded. “That’s all it was. Though not just anyone can do it.”

“Well, it doesn’t matter how you did it,” Amelia said at length. “I didn’t factor you turning out to be this strong into my calculations. As much as I hate to admit it, if this fight continues, I doubt I will be able to best you.” She heaved a deep sigh, then went to sheathe her sword once more with such an air of unconcern that Felix felt a pang of unease.

“I trust that means you will come with us quietly,” he said. “There’s much I must ask you.” First, he wanted to know about the traitors who had instigated the attack on the fort. Now that he knew Amelia was a mage, Felix suspected she was somehow responsible for their mutiny as well.

“Did you just say, ‘come with us quietly’?” Amelia asked, cocking her head and blinking her long-lashed eyes several times. It made her look much younger, like a girl yet to come of age.

“Indeed I did.”

She chuckled. “You say the most amusing things. Are the other two generals as funny as you?”

Felix stared at her. “So you don’t intend to come quietly?”

“I don’t know why you’d think I would. I mean, look around us.” She spread her arms dramatically.

Felix’s arrival had somewhat bolstered morale amongst the Crimson Knights, but their enemy still had the advantage. Even without Rosenmarie to lead them, the Crimson Knights were still elite warriors, and yet this unknown army—and who knew where they’d even come from—were making sport of them. It

was obvious that if the fighting continued, their losses would only grow.

All the more reason why...

“All the more reason why I must take you prisoner.”

“Oh, I see now.” Amelia nodded. “You’re right, of course. Soldiers without a general are no better than puppets with their strings cut. But I’m afraid we have already achieved what we set out to achieve in coming here. On top of that, thanks to your rare appearance on the battlefield, I’ve obtained valuable information about you. As such, we’ll be taking our leave of you now.”

“You think it’ll be that easy?” Felix raised his sword, while Amelia raised her left hand for the third time. “There’s no point—”

Amelia cackled with delight. “Look who let their guard down this time!” she cried, her smile twisting horribly. She turned her left hand—which she had, up until that moment, pointed at Felix—to where Teresa and Matthew stood with their swords drawn.

“No—!” For a second, Teresa’s body went stiff as though she’d been paralyzed. Then, without warning, she kicked Matthew, sending him flying. Felix knew with absolute certainty that such unnatural brute strength wasn’t hers. Matthew slammed heavily into the fort wall and crumpled, his face a mask of pain. Teresa swapped her sword to her other hand before pulling it up to her own throat. She resisted with all her might what appeared to be the compulsion to stab herself, but that wouldn’t last long.

“Lieutenant Teresa!” Felix cried.

“It doesn’t look like you’ll have time to take me prisoner. Look!” Amelia teased. “Unless you hurry, she’s going to kill herself, you know.” Felix knew that if he prioritized Amelia’s capture, Teresa would undoubtedly cut her own throat. He had few choices here.

“Damn you!” he snarled.

“Yes, that’s it. *That’s* the face I wanted to see,” Amelia said. “Farewell, then. I hope our paths will cross on another battlefield someday.” She turned, waving to him over her shoulder as she sent out the orders for her troops to retreat.

Felix used *Swift Step*, leaving a cloud of dust behind him as he flew to Teresa's side.

"My...my lord..." she stammered.

"I'm here for you," he said. He reached out to pry the sword from her hands, but it was as though it had become an extension of her body—she wouldn't, or rather *couldn't*, release it, and tearing it from her proved devilishly difficult. Felix was afraid to use any more force lest he break her fingers.

"Forgive me...my lord... I failed...you..." said Teresa, the struggle to force each word out clear on her face. Felix put his arms around her and drew her close to him, softly stroking her shining golden hair.

"I'm so sorry, but I have to knock you out," he said. "You may reprimand me as much as you like when you wake up."

"Even now..." Teresa said, laughing weakly. "Don't...don't worry...about..." She forced a smile, then shut her eyes. Felix snapped his arm down in a knife-hand strike, knocking her out with a single blow to the pressure point in her neck. He caught her in his arms as she crumpled.

Amelia was already long gone from the battlefield.

"You will pay for this," Felix said, "Amelia Stolast."

Chapter Two: The Royal Library

I

In the days of yore, all knew of the existence of Odh. Back then, there lived a small clan of people with exceptionally pure Odh, which gave them deep, ebony-black eyes. This was how they came to be called the Deep Folk.

In those days, a people who called themselves the Clan of the Wyrmfang crossed the sea with a great fleet to wage war on the True King. When the fighting seemed that it would never end, the True King turned to the Deep Folk, whose skill in battle was unsurpassed, to break the stalemate.

“Win me this war, Deep Folk,” said the True King, “and upon you I shall bestow everlasting prosperity.”

The Deep Folk took the True King at his word. They took up their swords and their spears and set out to kill the Clan of the Wyrmfang. The killing went on and on in an ever-mounting slaughter. After a few years fighting against the glorious might of the Deep Folk, the Clan of the Wyrmfang were routed. At long last, after a crushing defeat at the Battle of Francours, they began to retreat. The long war had finally ended, and peace returned to Duvedirica.

Though they had lost many of their comrades, the Deep Folk then stood as one in joyful anticipation of the bright future that awaited them.

But the king did not keep his promise.

Two months after the very last of the Clan of the Wyrmfang had departed from Duvedirica, the royal palace, only just remembering how to be at peace, was rocked by a shocking revelation.

One of the Deep Folk snuck into His Majesty’s chambers. They meant to murder him!

The accusation was a lie, of course. The king, after inviting one of the Deep Folk to the palace, had plied them with alcohol until they let their guard down,

then had them killed. The supposed would-be assassin had in fact been caught in the king's trap. To the Deep Folk, the accusation came like a bolt from the blue. Though they begged for an audience to defend themselves, the king naturally refused all such applications.

The Deep Folk had displayed their powers too openly. The king had grown fearful after having seen them fight that one day they would come to steal his throne. So it came to pass that the Deep Folk, who had once been Duvedirica's heroic saviors, were overnight branded as traitors.

Following this, the king made overtures to the Asura, a league of assassins who were the only ones who could match the Deep Folk in battle. His offer was simple: join him as he led a mighty host of a hundred thousand soldiers to lay siege to the Deep Folk village.

Though every one of the Deep Folk possessed extraordinary strength, they only numbered three hundred, all told. The king's army sent wave after wave of attackers without rest, day and night. The Deep Folk were strong, but one by one, they began to fall.

"Then, as the sun rose on the seventh day since the battle began..."

"Then what? What happened when the sun rose?" Abel, the tavern keeper, eagerly asked the man at the bar as he refilled his empty glass. The man smirked, then downed the brimming glass in one gulp.

"Well, well. Looks like I got a reaction. When I started, I thought perhaps I was boring you," he said.

The man had slipped into the tavern in the middle of the night, sat himself down at the bar, and brusquely demanded, "A drink." The tavern keeper had noted his silver hair—a rarity in these parts—and, as he handed over a full glass, decided to ask whether the man had any unusual tales. Though he seemed unsure at first, the man had eventually begun to haltingly recount the story the tavern keeper had just heard.

"Don't get hung up on stuff like that. There's something in this fairytale of yours that feels like it's on the verge of being true. It's weirdly convincing, y'know?"

“You don’t say...” the man said, his lip curling slightly.

“So did they kill all those Deep Folks in the end?”

“They did. Exterminated every last one of them,” the man murmured, sounding almost sad as he turned over his empty glass in his hand. “And that’s the end of the story.” He practically looked as though he’d been there himself, but right now Abel was too disappointed to pay the man’s expression much mind.

“That’s no good,” he said. “The good bit is supposed to come next, where one of them survives and goes to get revenge on the True King. If you end it there, the Deep Folk just come off as a bunch of poor sods who got taken advantage of.”

“I’m sorry it wasn’t to your liking,” the man said with an exaggerated shrug. He fished a few coppers from his pocket then placed them on the counter, before pushing his chair back and slowly standing up.

“You’re leaving already?” Abel asked.

“I am.”

“Don’t be like that. Sit down and tell me another story. I’ll give you another one, on the house. It’s not often I get to hear any interesting tales out here in the backcountry. You could pull a good audience with that last one.”

“If only I could, but my companion is here,” he said, looking toward the door. Abel followed his line of sight and found a woman with an infant perhaps half a year old in her arms standing in the doorway. He hadn’t even noticed them come in. The tavern was full of rough mercenary types who were very rowdy indeed, yet the baby was sound asleep.

“My love, we should go...” the woman said softly. The man gave her a small nod.

“I’m coming,” he said, then turned to leave. Abel, flustered, called out to stop him.

“Do you have lodgings for the night?” he asked.

“No, we’re not staying in town...”

“You’re leaving?!” Abel exclaimed. “Where do you mean to go in the middle of the night with a baby in your arms? Look, I won’t bother you any further, so at least stay here tonight—I’ll give you a discount on the room, as my thanks for the story.” He grabbed a key from the wall and thrust it at the man. He wasn’t trying to fleece them; he only felt sorry for the child. However, the man only shook his head sadly.

“I thank you for your kindness,” he said, “but we cannot linger in this town.”

“But why?” Abel demanded. When the man didn’t reply, he asked, “You’re not in trouble, are you?” Looking the man over once more, he noticed the armor plates glinting under his cloak. The woman likely wore something similar beneath her own cloak. It was hard to imagine that they were traveling for pleasure, dressed like that—and with a suckling babe to care for, to boot.

The man rubbed his neck, looking discomfited.

“Forget it, I shouldn’t pry into your business,” Abel said hastily. “If you must leave, just make sure you keep a keen eye out for bandits. What with the warm weather lately, they’ve been prowling about attacking travelers night and day.”

The man was quiet for a moment. “I appreciate the advice,” he said at last, giving Abel a slight smile. Then the man put an arm around the woman’s shoulders, pulling her gently to his side as they left the tavern. As Abel tidied away the glass left all alone on the counter, he recalled the woman’s face.

“She was mighty pretty, now that I think about it. And those eyes. Black as ebony. I’ve never seen the like...” He trailed off, then chuckled to himself. “Yeah, right,” he muttered. His words were swallowed up by the cacophony around him.

II

The Central District of Fis

The bell tower, the symbol of the city of Fis, rang out to announce midday. Masses of people filled the streets, walking this way and that over the evenly laid cobblestones. Two women stood at the edge of one such street. All the young men passing by who noticed them stopped dead in their tracks to stare

at them.

“It’s just, I dunno. I didn’t think it’d be so shabby,” said Olivia, staring glumly at the Royal Library. It was a white brick building, constructed in the Glochian style that had been popular in the sixth century of Tempus Fugit.

“Major, please just say ‘it has character,’ if you must,” Claudia sighed. “The Royal Library, as I told you, is the embodiment of the history of Fernest. Besides, it has undergone a number of renovations over the years, the last of which was, as it happens, in the year—”

“Don’t start. Can we go in already?” Olivia said. Claudia tried to seize the opportunity to show off her knowledge, but apparently Olivia wasn’t remotely interested. She seized Claudia’s arm and dragged her over to a small, cylindrical guardhouse next to the main gates.

“Excuse me,” Olivia called out. There was no door on the guardhouse, so they looked inside. There they found three civilian men, as well as two more who were sturdily built—probably guards. They all turned to look at Claudia.

“So... We want to go into the library. Is that okay?” Olivia said, throwing out her chest to ensure they all saw the knight’s insignia there.

One extremely nervous-looking man pushed his black-rimmed spectacles up his nose and said, “You seem rather young to be a knight. May I ask your name?”

“Valedstorm,” Olivia replied cheerfully. The man furrowed his eyebrows at her.

“I’ve never heard of the Valedstorms before...” he said. “What is your rank?”

“Rank? I’m a major.”

“That is your military rank. I am asking for your noble rank.”

“Noble rank? What’s that?” Olivia asked, looking at Claudia in confusion.

In Fernest, the five ranks of nobility were, from highest to lowest: duke, marquess, count, viscount, and baron. There was additionally a system of conferment known as the seven Orders of the Astra. Unlike noble rank, which continued down the family lines, these orders lasted only as long as the

recipient lived. The highest was the black and purple astra, followed by the red and purple astra, the green and purple astra, the white and purple astra, then the black, red, and green astras respectively. These gave rise to further hierarchies even between those who possessed the same noble title, dictated by who possessed an order of the astra and its color, if applicable.

Claudia was certain all this had been explained to Olivia when she was made a knight, but apparently none of it had stuck. Keeping her exasperation to herself, Claudia informed the man that Olivia was a baroness, at which his expression immediately darkened.

“As I am sure you are aware,” he said, “a recommendation from a person of appropriate rank is required in order to enter the library. Have you submitted your application?”

“Yep, pretty sure that’s all done,” Olivia replied.

The man looked disbelievingly at her. “Are you *sure*?” he said. Most likely, it was Olivia’s age that inspired this reaction. Not only did he clearly not believe for a second that Olivia was related to the tightly knit upper echelons of the nobility, he even seemed to be *looking down* on her.

Claudia drew out a tidily folded sheet of paper. “This should clear things up,” she announced as she unfolded it for him to read. Neinhardt had given her this official note of permission just in case, but already she found it useful. He must have known something like this might happen.

“Eh?” said the man, leaning forward to scrutinize the document. “A letter of recommendation?” A moment later, he made a ridiculous squawking sound. “M-My most s-sincere apologies!” he exclaimed. “We were of course informed of your visit! Th-This way, please!” He snapped at his companions to get the gate open while bowing as deeply as he could to Olivia and Claudia.

He sure is singing a different tune now, as they say, Claudia thought. Shaking her head, she followed after Olivia, who was happily making her way through the open gates.

“Oh, wow! No way! No way! Claudia, look how many books there are!” Olivia beamed like a child as she gazed around in excitement. The interior of the

library was entirely different from the heavy design of the exterior. It was constructed all from wood, two stories high with a soaring ceiling that made the space feel airy and open. A concourse ran down the center of the library with towering bookshelves stretching away at even intervals on either side. Statues were placed along the concourse, adding to the grandeur of it all. At one end, there was a circular counter where several librarians rushed around attending to visitor requests.

“It’ll be no small task to find what we’re after amongst all these. Shall we ask a librarian first?” Claudia suggested. Olivia nodded twice. They waited until they spotted a free librarian, approaching her where she stood reshelving books.

“Excuse me,” Claudia began, “I was wondering if you could tell us something.” The woman looked up with a small noise of surprise.

“Goodness, what a prodigiously pretty soldier. What can I help you with?” The librarian introduced herself as Claryss. As she spoke, her eyes ran all over Claudia, appraising every inch of her. The woman had red-rimmed glasses, freckles, and bangs trimmed in a perfectly straight line across her forehead.

“We want to know why a certain noble house died out.”

“Why they died out? But you didn’t need to come all the way to the Royal Library for that,” Claryss replied, adjusting her glasses. “Surely the *Roll of the Nobility* would have such information?”

“It wasn’t noted in the *Roll*, hence why I’m asking you.”

“It wasn’t?”

“Yes.” Deciding it would be easier to show her than to explain, Claudia pulled the book in question from her bag. She had bookmarked the Valedstorm entry in advance, and so immediately opened it to the relevant page.

“This is the one,” she said, holding it out. Claryss looked dubiously at the page.

“Hrmmm...” Claryss said, her eyes running dubiously down the page. “The House of Valedstorm... Line died out over one hundred and fifty years ago...” She reached the crest and she gasped. “Black scythes crossed over a skull? What a prodigiously unsettling crest...” Regaining her composure, she went on.

“You’re quite right, the reason isn’t noted here.” She pushed her glasses up her nose several times, muttering to herself. Claudia thought of the official at the guardhouse doing the same thing and wondered if it was a habit shared by all office workers.

“The House of Valedstorm is the only one where the reason the line ended isn’t recorded. Do you know why that could be?” Claudia asked. She had gone back and checked and found that every other failed noble line had the reason for its extinction clearly noted. Though her desire to get to the bottom of the matter couldn’t match Olivia’s, that much had piqued her curiosity.

“With only this to go on, I can’t really say anything for sure...”

“You don’t think you can help?”

“Well...” Claryss looked thoughtful. “The one thing I *can* say is that it wasn’t a simple mistake.”

“What does that mean?”

“Simply put, the information has been deliberately omitted,” Claryss said matter-of-factly as she clapped the heavy book shut.

“Deliberately omitted...” Claudia repeated, looking down at the *Record of Noble Houses* that Claryss handed back to her.

“People in power will hide away information that is inconvenient for them, or manipulate it to suit their own ends. It’s hardly uncommon. The only thing is, in this case, it’s *only* the reason for the line dying out that isn’t noted. Everything else is properly documented.”

“And what does *that* mean?”

“It means that the omission isn’t regarded as significant. At least by the kingdom in the present day.” There was a brief silence, broken when, all of a sudden, Olivia happened to pop out behind Claudia. Claryss let out a tiny scream.

“Hey, what’s the best way to investigate?” She asked.

“Is this young lady with you?” Claryss stammered.

“If anything, I’m with her,” Claudia replied. Claryss gave Olivia the same

appraising look over she'd applied to Claudia earlier.

"I see..." she said. "You're awfully beautiful as well, aren't you... Now, where was I..." She returned to Claudia's original question. "I have to say, this is a very unusual crest. No one would usually use imagery related to death in a crest."

"Really?" Olivia said, surprised. "I think it's cool."

"Well, think about it. It's highly inauspicious. Risking the demise of your house because of an unlucky crest is no laughing matter. That they went ahead and used this design anyway is positively fascinating."

Olivia was quiet for a moment, then tugged on Claudia's sleeve. "Claudiaaaa," she said, looking uncharacteristically troubled. Claudia suspected she was worried that listening to Claryss, who was now ignoring Olivia completely to continue her spiel, wasn't going to get them anywhere. Claudia had to agree.

She cleared her throat. "So do you have an answer then? Or not?"

"Huh?" Claryss said, pausing. "Well, we won't know for sure without researching it. But there are around forty thousand volumes stored in the Royal Library. They are organized by topic to a degree, but even so, it's a formidable task for amateurs." *Forty thousand volumes?* Claudia felt faint. She knew they were looking for information from over a hundred fifty years ago, and thought she had come mentally prepared for what that might entail. But this was a far greater task than she had anticipated. With forty thousand volumes to get through, they could search through to the following winter and still not arrive at an answer.

"I'm sorry, but we only have five days here in Fis. Is there nothing you can do for us?"

"Only five days...?" Claryss echoed, astounded. Claudia couldn't blame her. "That is a prodigiously steep request..."

"I do appreciate how unreasonable this is for us to ask of you," Claudia said apologetically.

Claryss sighed, then said, "I'll see what I can do. You've got me interested too. I'll help you with the research."

“That’s incredibly kind of you...” Claudia’s eyes slid over to where a number of other librarians who’d been listening in on their conversation stood rolling their eyes. “But are you really sure that’s all right?”

“I don’t mind at all—it’s all part of my job,” Claryss said, her tone oblivious so that Claudia couldn’t tell if she was aware of the other librarians’ gazes or not. “However, even with me to help you, that’s still only the three of us. If we could find just one more person...”

“One more person, you say?” Claudia said, the face of a certain young man already appearing before her eyes.

The following day after Claudia and Olivia’s visit to the Royal Library, a young man with blond hair and blue eyes stood nervously before the library gates with all the self-assuredness of a wet dishrag.

While the librarians set about with great enthusiasm getting the gates open, Warrant Officer Ashton Senefelder turned to Claudia and said, “Lieutenant, are you...are you *sure* they agreed to let me into the library?” His eyes flicked nervously to the guards. “I don’t want to think about what trouble I’ll be in if it turns out there was some mistake...”

“Stop worrying. I told you, Brigadier General Neinhardt’s given you permission. If he hadn’t, those guards would have thrown you out already. Now are you satisfied, or do I have to answer the same question another hundred times?”

After leaving the Royal Library the previous day, Claudia had gone to see Neinhardt again. When Claudia explained the situation, he had made a special exception to grant Ashton permission to enter the library. Ashton had been beside himself with excitement when Claudia got back to their lodgings and told him about it. From that point on, however, he grew steadily more uneasy. At dinner that night, he kept asking her if she was sure there hadn’t been some mix-up, to the extent that she wasn’t even able to enjoy the inn’s first-rate cooking.

“But I’m...I’m a commoner!” Ashton protested. The fact was that the gates were already open before him, but he didn’t budge. He was giving her a look

that implied he didn't think she was listening to anything he said. Beside him, Olivia bounced up and down, impatient to get inside the library.

"You don't need to remind me of that," Claudia said. "It just goes to show how impressive your achievements in the battle with the Crimson Knights were." Ashton's own achievements tended to be overlooked when compared to Olivia's spectacular feats, but his reputation as a tactician was growing all the same. Claudia didn't think there was anyone else alive who could have done what he did, rendering thirty thousand of their enemy's soldiers useless. No doubt Neinhardt had been thinking something similar when he made the exception in granting Ashton permission to enter the Royal Library (thereby robbing Claudia of another chance to wring his neck).

"But I mean, I don't think the two are really related..." Ashton mumbled, still looking indecisive. Claudia narrowed her eyes at him. It had been a while since she'd given him a lecture, but that seemed to be what was in order here.

"They are entirely related, as should be obvious by the fact that you got permission to enter in the first place, for crying out loud," she exclaimed. "That humility of yours is getting to be as much a flaw as a virtue. You have to start giving yourself credit where it's due, or people inclined to do so are going to start thinking it's all false modesty." With this, she raised a hand and swung it down hard to whack him on the backside. There was a satisfying *SLAP* and a pitiful yelp from Ashton.

Olivia giggled. "She really spanked you, huh?" she said, patting her own backside. "Your butt might turn bright red, like a monkey's. Or maybe it'll split in half!"

"It's always been split in half!" Ashton retorted loudly, rubbing where Claudia had hit him.

Claudia smirked. "Come on, then. We're on a time limit, after all."

"I'm sorry," Ashton said sheepishly. "I'm not sure why, but I feel much better. I'm fine now." He gave her a small bow, then marched forward with Olivia at his heels, still teasing him. Claudia watched him and heaved a deep sigh.

He really is hopeless. I wonder if this is what having a little brother would feel like... No, any little brother of mine would be made of much sterner stuff. She

walked past the saluting guards toward the library entrance.

Thanks in part to the early morning, the library was totally deserted. Sunlight spilled through the skylight windows, making the particles of dust hanging in the air sparkle.

Wow... Ashton was awed by the sight. So this is the Royal Library. I've dreamed of this moment. He took a quick glance at the nearest shelf and immediately saw there were a great number of rare books there. Experiencing a flood of emotions, he gazed around the space, then noticed several librarians arranging books and cleaning the shelves. His eyes were drawn automatically to a small woman brushing off the books with a duster.

Hold on, he thought, I've seen her somewhere before... He was trying to place the woman in his memory when Claudia walked right up to her.

"Good morning," she said, "Sorry to impose on you again."

"Good morning to you too," the woman replied. "You are prodigiously early today."

"Well, we're short on time."

"Indeed. Shall we begin, then?" Claryss glanced behind Claudia and said, "Over there must be the person you mentioned yesterday who will be assisting—oh! I don't believe it!" No sooner had she laid eyes on Ashton than she made a beeline toward him, pushing her red glasses up her nose as she approached.

Ashton made a choking noise. "Claryss! You...You work at the Royal Library now, do you?"

"I do," she replied. "I haven't seen your face around here in a long time, Ashton Senefelder. It must be, what, two years?" She looked him over with a disconcerting glint in her eyes, and Ashton had the sensation that his entire body was being probed. He gulped down the saliva that suddenly filled his mouth.

"It's...It's been that long, has it?" he asked.

"I have to say, Ashton Senefelder, I didn't think I'd see *you* in uniform," she said, flicking the badge at his collar and giving him a beguiling smile. "I always

thought it was a forgone conclusion that you'd go into research."

"I mean, I didn't exactly sign up because I wanted to," he said. Then, realizing his slip, he shot a terrified glance at Claudia, afraid another lecture was incoming.

"What? Oh, don't worry about that," Claudia said, grimacing slightly. "If anything, we ought to be ashamed of ourselves for allowing things to slip to the point where we have to conscript people like you in the first place." Ashton, realizing he was safe, sighed with relief.

"So you two know each other then?" Claudia went on.

"Um, yes. I suppose you could say that. We were at the same school," Ashton explained. Ashton had been enrolled at the Royal Lion Academy, a school known for turning out skilled politicians and researchers every year. Claryss had been two years ahead of him. Back then, her attentions had been an ongoing source of anxiety for Ashton.

"Ashton Senefelder, that is a prodigiously indifferent way to put it," Claryss said, then added, her voice dripping with significance, "After all the things we did together back at the academy, at all hours of the day and night!"



She leaned in against his chest, and Ashton smelt her sweet, feminine scent.

“Oh, *really?*” Claudia said with something like contempt in her tone.

“What, no! It’s not like that!” Ashton protested. “Claryss, would you please stop giving people the wrong idea? All you did was lock me in a room and force me to help you write your thesis!” He quickly backed away from Claryss, shooting a look at Olivia as he did so, but Olivia only smiled at the pair of them, apparently unconcerned.

“Oh, Ashton Senefelder,” Claryss said, laughing, “you’re as fun to tease as ever. Anyway, having you here will raise our efficiency through the roof.” She pushed her glasses up her nose again, then strode off through the shelves, leaving the others to hurry after her.

III

It was four days since their arrival in the capital. With Ashton helping, their research had indeed progressed at an impressive pace, yet they still hadn’t found the answers they sought.

Ashton and Claryss stood in front of a bookshelf, discussing some difficult topic. Claudia, meanwhile, sat in front of them with a stack of books beside her, staring up at the ceiling with such rapt intensity it wasn’t hard to imagine some uncanny substance oozing out from her mouth. Olivia sat with a book open in front of her so thick it looked like it would make a decent weapon. She shut it with a bang, sighing heavily.

“Ferneſt really let its military expansion run out of control toward the end of the warlord period, huh,” she said. “It ended up severely undermining the kingdom’s national power. I guess you could say they’re paying the price for that now.”

During the period Olivia spoke of, Fernest had launched a series of reckless military campaigns on the orders of King Raphael, buoyed by its enormous military and economic might. Though at first its armies advanced unopposed, as the front line expanded, the supply lines naturally followed suit. Despite this, supplies were neglected, and the logistics officers—the military’s lifeline—were

not afforded adequate protection. As a result, one after another, the supply lines were cut off—and no army can go on winning when its soldiers are starving, no matter how mighty.

Olivia, remembering the lessons on military strategy Z had drilled into her, thought that arrogance didn't even begin to describe such a blunder—it was more akin to suicide.

“My grandfather used to go on about that. How the king and the army fell in love with the idea of dominating the continent and got carried away by it. It's awfully ironic now, with Fernest barely holding on against the empire and its talk of unification...” Claudia paused, then said, “How is that related to our current research, though?”

“Well...” Olivia began slowly. “It might not be, but I thought knowing the history of the kingdom would probably come in handy. You never know what might turn into a lead.”

“I see...” Claudia said, nodding in apparent admiration. “I think you're absolutely right, Major.” Olivia cleared her throat and puffed her chest out proudly, trying to look as pompous as she could. Just then, she heard something fall on the floor nearby. She looked and saw Ashton staring at her, his mouth hanging open in shock.

“Are you gaping like that because you want me to put something in there?” she asked. “I'm afraid I don't have any biscuits—they said I wasn't allowed to bring food into the library.” She pulled out her pockets, sending a shower of biscuit crumbs onto the floor and earning herself a truly ferocious glare from a nearby librarian.

“Of course not!” Ashton retorted. “I was just taken aback to hear you saying things that make so much sense.”

“Huh? Now you're just confusing me.”

“How am I confusing you?”

“Because everything I say always makes sense.”

“Are you... You're not serious, are you?” Ashton said, staring at her in wonder as Olivia looked back at him with an identical expression.

“You always have such killer jokes, Ashton,” Olivia said. “I think you could probably place in a joke contest, with talent like that. Honestly, you could probably win outright!” She turned to Claudia. “Don’t you think so?”

Claudia, intensely focused on turning the pages of the book in front of her, was seized by a violent coughing fit and didn’t reply. Olivia wondered if she’d come down with a cold. She then looked at Claryss, who gave her a brilliant smile and salute. “Comrade Olivia,” she said as she pushed her glasses up again. Olivia had no idea what that was supposed to mean.

After that, they continued diligently with their research. Ashton and Claryss dug up books that looked as though they might concern the Valedstorms, handing them off to Olivia and Claudia to read through them. Midday passed and evening approached, and eventually they realized the light coming into the library had become a deep red. Their fourth day was drawing to a close and they still had no significant progress to show for it.

Claudia sighed. “That’s it, it’s too dark to make out these letters anymore. It’s time to call it a day.” She carefully shut the book, heaving a great yawn.

“What? Not yet! I can still read fine,” Olivia protested. On the table before them, still unread, sat a pile of books, including titles like *A Study of Heraldry*, *The Kingdom of Fernest: Its Glory and Its Shame*, and *The Clan of Darkness*. Olivia, who had been raised in the depths of the forest where the sun scarcely reached, hardly noticed the gloom.

“I’m afraid the library will be closing soon,” Claudia said. As though echoing her, Olivia heard the chime of the bell tower. All the librarians began hurrying around to get ready to close the library for the day.

“Just one more day...” Claryss mused as she put away the books. “Thanks to Comrade Olivia’s extraordinary reading speed, we’re actually making better progress than I expected. Even so...” she trailed off. “Getting there in five days was always a tall order.” She seemed to have taken a liking to the nickname “Comrade Olivia.” Olivia wanted to ask why, but something about Claryss reminded her uncomfortably of Gile, so she decided it was better to leave sleeping dogs alone, or however that saying went.

“Until tomorrow then,” Claryss said, seeing them off. Olivia and the others left the library once again without anything to show for their time. They passed along a street packed with shops, then continued on toward the southern district where the city’s inns were clustered. Along the way, Olivia noticed a woman in military uniform coming toward them, the fading light of the sunset behind her. The woman stopped in front of Olivia then gave her a graceful salute.

“Aren’t you Mr. Fish...um, Brigadier General Neinhardt’s aide?”

“Yes, ser! Second Lieutenant Katerina Reinas, at your service!”

“Did you need something? If it’s more presents, I gave you all the fish I caught last time. I’m out of biscuits right now too,” Olivia said, turning out her pockets to show Katerina, but the woman shook her head.

“We are not in need of fish or biscuits, ser. Forgive me, but I must ask you to come to Leticia Castle with me at once.”

“Leticia Castle?”

“Yes, ser. Brigadier General Neinhardt is expecting you in his workroom.”

For a moment, Olivia wondered if Neinhardt had got a stomachache after eating the fish she gave him and was now angry at her about it. But that couldn’t be right, she reassured herself. The fish she gave him were all freshly caught, after all. She glanced at Claudia, but she looked as lost as Olivia felt. Ashton only muttered, “As if I’d know anything,” when she turned to him.

“Why’s he expecting us?” Olivia asked.

“I’m sorry ser, but I can’t speak about confidential military matters in a place like this,” Katerina replied. “I must request that you ask Brigadier General Neinhardt directly.” Before anyone could protest, she turned on her heels and marched off toward the castle. Olivia, Claudia, and Ashton followed her, all three of them still mystified.

Neinhardt’s Workroom

Katerina showed them into the workroom, where Neinhardt sat scribbling

away. As they entered, he put his pen down and looked up.

“I’m sorry to summon you without warning like this,” he said. His face was horribly pale and lifeless.

“What’s happened, ser?” Claudia asked.

“I’ll get straight to the point. The Helios Knights have mobilized. Unless we do something, this will mean the collapse of the central front,” Neinhardt said grimly. Claudia felt a moan of despair welling up deep in her chest. The Helios Knights—the army that had conquered Kier Fortress. They all wore silver plate mail and were renowned not just for the skill of individual soldiers, but for how they excelled in large-scale battle tactics. She also knew their commander was the most powerful man in the imperial army.

“Shouldn’t the First Legion march at once, then? Right now, the Seventh Legion has the south and the north under control, so there shouldn’t be any problems.”

“I know all that, obviously. Unfortunately, it’s not that simple.” Neinhardt didn’t say it directly, but Claudia had a pretty good idea of what he meant.

One name in mind, she asked, “Do you mean to tell us that His Majesty—”

“Whatever you were going to say next, don’t,” Neinhardt cut her off. “I really don’t want to have to arrest you for treason, Second Lieutenant.”

I knew it, Claudia thought to herself. There was a grim intensity on Neinhardt’s face that brooked no argument.

A brief silence followed this exchange, though to Ashton it felt like an eternity. Katerina, who stood beside Neinhardt, was watching him anxiously.

“I beg your pardon, ser,” Claudia said at last. “Now, why did you summon us here? You can’t possibly be thinking of sending out the Seventh Legion?”

Although the battle against the Crimson Knights had ended in victory, the Seventh Legion had taken its own heavy losses. With provisioning the northern lands currently taking highest priority, they certainly didn’t have the resources to move on the central front as well. Claudia didn’t believe that Neinhardt could have failed to grasp something so basic.

“I’m well aware that that isn’t possible,” he replied.

“Then what do you want?”

“A guard militia is currently being mobilized in the central lands. We expect to assemble around six thousand soldiers.”

“You don’t mean...?!” Claudia gasped. Neinhardt gave a significant nod, then turned to look at Olivia.

“Just so, Lieutenant Claudia. Major Olivia, we want you to lead that guard militia to go to the aid of the Second Legion,” Neinhardt announced.

No sooner were the words out of his mouth, however, than Olivia gave her answer. “Absolutely no way,” she replied. “We still haven’t finished our research. Plus Ashton hasn’t taken me to the best cake shop in town known only to locals in the capital yet.”

“H-Hey!” Ashton hissed. “This is way more serious than any of that.”

But Olivia puffed out her cheeks with a huff and refused to look at him. Claudia knew from experience that it was all but impossible to talk any sense into her when she got like this. Ashton went on trying, just in case something got through to her, but to no avail. Olivia’s cheeks refused to deflate, making her look like a puffed-up spotted frog.

“I really am sorry to keep putting everything on you, Major,” Neinhardt said. He didn’t rise from his chair, but he lowered his head to her. Neinhardt—her superior officer and a *general*—bowed to her. Katerina looked like she might say something, but Olivia didn’t give her time.

“Then send someone else, ser, if that’s really how you feel. Like I said, I’m not done with my research at the library,” Olivia insisted, refusing to back down an inch. An order from a superior officer was supposed to be followed without question. In Olivia’s case in particular, however, such arguments carried little weight. Right now, she seemed like she might walk away from the army altogether if Neinhardt tried to force her to obey. Clearly that was how much learning what had happened to the Valedstorms meant to her, though the question of *why* she was so fixated—one might even say obsessed—with how the line had died out remained unanswered.

The atmosphere of the workroom grew steadily more awkward. Ashton's eyes kept flicking about the room as though he wished he were somewhere else. Neinhardt, whose fault it was, placed his elbows on the desk then slowly laced his fingers together. It was a gesture of his that Claudia knew well.

"Very well," he said at last. "Then let's make a deal that will benefit you as well."

"A deal?" Olivia said. She leaned toward him ever so slightly. It looked like the sudden proposal had caught her attention.

"Yes, a deal. If you agree to go to the central front, I will ensure you get permission to enter the library for as long as you need to finish your research. I will also inform Lord Paul myself, of course. Weren't you due to return to the Seventh Legion the day after tomorrow anyway?"

Well played, Claudia thought. Just as Neinhardt said, they had to leave Fis the day after tomorrow, whether they found what they were looking for or not. Not to mention that as far as she could tell, there was little hope that they'd find anything conclusive with just one day to go. It looked like Olivia had an inkling of this as well, because at this attractive proposal her cheeks rapidly deflated. In the short time Neinhardt had known her, he already had her in the palm of his hand.

Well, what did you expect from Neinhardt, master of intrigue and aide to the First Legion? Claudia thought to herself.

"Really?" Olivia said at last.

"I, Neinhardt Blanche, swear it upon my honor," he replied.

"Awesome!" Olivia cried, then added, "Sorry, I mean, understood, ser! I accept the mission to lead your guard militia to aid the Second Legion!" She gave him the biggest smile she'd worn all day and saluted.

IV

The Southern Quarter of Fis

The royal capital was full of historical buildings, but nowhere more so than

the southern quarter, which housed the colosseum, the old palace, and much, much more. Ornate, wrought-iron signs decorated the outside of many of the inns that lined both sides of the Mithry Canal, like fighters facing off over its clear waters. One such sign, which depicted a crow with its wings outstretched, stood over the Ashcrow Inn—the establishment where Olivia, Claudia, and Ashton had put up while in town. Ashton had suggested it based on its reputation for excellent bread, and Olivia, who loved bread, had agreed without a second thought.

It was the day after Olivia received Neinhardt’s orders to aid the Second Legion in battle. She, Ashton, and Claudia were eating breakfast in the main room on the ground floor of the inn. Most of the other staying guests were yet to rise—of the twenty or so seats at the round table, less than half were occupied.

Olivia was stuffing her face with freshly baked bread when a sturdily built woman with a tray in one hand came over. Her name was Anne, the landlady of the Ashcrow Inn.

“How’s the walnut bread, little Olivia?” she asked, briskly setting down a bowl of creamy stew packed with hearty chunks of meat and potato and carrot before each of them. Needless to say, as soon as the mouth-watering aroma wafted up to her, Olivia felt twice as hungry as before.

“Itho, tho good!” Olivia exclaimed through a mouthful of bread. “Cwuthy on th’owthide’n thoft’n fwuffy inthide! Thyoo thmellth good too!”

Claudia sighed deeply beside her. “Major, *please* finish your mouthful before you speak. Haven’t I told you this a thousand times before? Or is my advice not worthy of your attention?”

“Yeah,” Ashton chimed in, equally as exasperated as Claudia. “You’re not doing it on purpose, are you?” Olivia shook her head rapidly. *Oh no*, she thought, *they’re both making that face again*.

Anne let out a booming laugh. “Always so severe, eh, Claudia?” she said as she loaded their empty plates onto her tray. “No need for fancy manners with plain fare like this. Olivia, you just eat however you please.”

At this, Arkady the innkeeper poked his snub-nosed, sunken-eyed face out from the kitchen. “Well, I’m sorry it’s so *plain*,” he said, sounding thoroughly disgruntled. Anne snorted.

Claudia dabbed daintily at her mouth with her napkin as she sat up straight. “You are very kind to say so, ma’am, but it simply won’t do. If she is to be a noble, she must get a handle on basic table manners.” She looked sharply at Olivia, who shrank back like a turtle. Claudia really had been nagging her a lot lately.

Anne looked from one to the other with something like sympathy in her eyes.

“Being noble isn’t all fun and games, is it?” she said. “Ah, but it does make an old woman sad to think dear little Olivia’s leaving today!”

“It makes you sad?” Olivia inquired, intrigued.

“Well, of course, dearie! It’s not every day we get a guest with such an appreciation for our cooking,” Anne said with a querulous smile.

“Well, don’t worry, ma’am!” Olivia replied cheerfully. “I’ll be back just as soon as I’ve taken care of the imperials. I’ve still got things to do here in the capital.” After the last-minute decision that Olivia would go to the aid of the Second Legion, they had gone to Claryss to explain. It had been decided then that she would continue to research in their absence. Olivia wanted to get back to the library as soon as possible so she could continue to hunt for clues about Z, and that meant they had to beat these Helios Knights or whoever pronto.

“Is that right, dearie? In that case, we’ll have a proper feast ready for you when you get back.”

“Yeah!”

“If things get dicey, though, you skip on out of there though, you hear?” Anne advised her. “Noble or commoner, we all get but one life. We were all created equal on that count, nobles and commoners alike.”

An irritated voice came from the kitchen. “Hey! You done chewing the fat yet? The guests are coming down! *Women*,” he went on under his breath, “they’re always talking too much.”

A procession of bleary-eyed guests made their way down the stairs to the dining area. Almost immediately, the seats at the round table filled up.

“All right!” Anne shouted back, then to Olivia and others muttered, “What a tyrant, eh? Now, you three come back safe, you hear? And Ashton,”—Ashton looked up in confusion as she addressed him out of nowhere—“Don’t forget, at the end of the day, you’re still a man. You’re to keep little Olivia safe.”

“I, um, yes, ma’am.” He inclined his head stiffly while beside him Claudia smirked. Anne returned him a nod and a smile; then, squaring her shoulders, she marched back to the kitchen. Moments later, the husband and wife’s shouting voices echoed out to a harmony of shattering plates. As Ashton gazed over at the kitchen door in transfixed horror, Claudia took a map from her pocket, then cleared her throat once to restore order.

“I’d like to go over our schedule,” she announced. “First of all, we make for Fort Glacia, where the militia will be assembling. Once the force is mobilized, we head west to join the Second Legion.” She ran a finger along the map from Fort Glacia to the central front.

“Are you sure this is going to work?” Ashton said, frowning. “It’ll be a decently sized force, but it’s still just a bunch of whatever soldiers they could scrape together. I honestly have to wonder if they’ll even take orders from us. Plus, the Helios Knights are extremely good at large-scale battles. As things stand, I don’t like our chances.”

Olivia agreed with Ashton. A disorganized mob wasn’t going to win a battle any time soon, no matter how many soldiers they rounded up.

“I think Ashton’s right,” she said, “but we still can’t afford the time it’ll take to get them working as an army. For all we know, the Second Legion is on the brink of collapse right this moment.”

“I don’t disagree, it’s just...” Ashton trailed off into frustrated grumbling, folding his arms. Apparently, he wasn’t convinced. Olivia thought she ought to say something commander-like.

“How about this then?” she said, raising a finger. “We say that if they try their best, they’ll get books, or sweets, or something like that. That’ll get everyone fired up, for sure.”

“This isn’t the time to joke around!” Ashton snapped back at once, thoroughly blindsiding Olivia, who’d not meant her suggestion as anything but serious. There wasn’t a human alive who wouldn’t be thrilled to receive books or sweets, she was sure of it.

“I’m not joking, Ashton. Listen,” she said patiently, “the fundamental difference between humans and beasts is that—”

“*That’s it!*” Ashton cut her off, a wicked smile spreading across his face. “Olivia, I’ve got an idea.” She knew just looking at his smile that it was definitely something nasty. Claudia eyed Ashton dubiously, so she must have sensed it too.

“I trust you’re not planning on using the major for something nefarious?” she said, a warning note in her voice.

“Nefarious? Don’t be silly,” Ashton replied. “I’d never do anything like that. I just had a thought...”

“*What kind of thought?*” Claudia said, leaning forward so that she was nose-to-nose with Ashton. He shoved his chair back to get away from her.

“Wh-Whoa! Bit close there!”

“Answer the question. *Now.*”

“Um, well. I just thought that maybe, once all the soldiers have gathered, Olivia could give them a little demonstration...” he said, then laughed nervously.

“A demonstration from the major, you say...” Claudia said, showing no sign of letting up on him. “What in particular did you have in mind?”

Determinedly avoiding her eyes, Ashton replied, “Oh, nothing too flashy...”

“In that case, *hurry up and answer the question.*”

“Just...just a few straw combat dummies, for Olivia to show off her sword work on,” he answered, glancing at Olivia as he spoke.

“You want her to do a swordplay demonstration?”

“Yes. I was thinking once they get a look at her, it’ll scare them into following

our orders properly.”

“Huh...” Claudia mused. “In other words, you want to control them through fear, so they’ll follow you like slaves.”

“I mean, wouldn’t say ‘slaves,’ exactly...” Ashton said. “But in essence, yes.”

“Yes, I see, I see,” Claudia said, then laughed out loud. “That’s quite the idea!”

“R-Right? I—Ow, owowowow!” Ashton yelped. Claudia, a humorless smile plastered on her face, reached out and yanked hard on his ear. *The yaksha returneth*, Olivia thought to herself, covering her face with her hands.

“The *nerve*...” Claudia growled. “First that armor you got her, now this—just where do you get all these unwholesome ideas? Sometimes I think I should cut your head open and see what’s inside for myself!”

Terror gripped Olivia in a vice. Little wonder it did, as an image of Claudia appeared in her mind’s eye, knife in hand and grinning as she lopped off the top of Ashton’s skull.

“I’d really prefer you didn’t,” Ashton yelped, “and the thing with the armor was beyond my control!”

“Um, Claudia? If it’s just swinging my sword around a bit, I’d be—” Olivia began as tentatively as she possibly could, but Claudia immediately whipped around to glare at her. For some reason there were a few strands of hair caught in her mouth. This would definitely haunt her dreams tonight.

“—very *not* happy to do it! Not a chance, Ashton!”

“What? Olivia?!”

“I’m going on ahead! Bye!” Inhaling the last of her stew, Olivia dashed outside, doing her best to ignore Ashton’s imploring eyes. She knew she wasn’t out of the woods yet. *But for now*, she told herself, *I’ve gotta make a strategic retreat*.

Interlude: Temptation

The Command Room at Windsome Castle, Northern Fernest

“Yet more temptations, I see,” Paul said as he read over the document. It was, briefly put, an account of how a mysterious, unknown army had attacked Fort Astora. This was an astonishing turn of events, as no other country would dare to bare their fangs at the empire; at least, not openly. In addition, though Paul had not yet confirmed the veracity of this part, the report said that this mystery army had overpowered the Crimson Knights. That truly caught Paul’s eye. Repeated defeats took a heavy toll on any army, both physically and mentally. The Crimson Knights might be famed for their raw power, but Paul was sure they weren’t the exception to the rule. If the Seventh Legion marched now, they could plausibly take even Fort Astora. Successfully doing so would mean securing a powerful foothold from which they could oppose the empire. With Fernest so outmatched at present, the possibility held far greater importance than simply recapturing a fort.

“As it happens, I am told that the north is now largely stable,” Otto remarked. It was so as though Otto was egging him on that Paul couldn’t help a wry smile.

“So what do you think, Otto?”

“About what, my lord?”

“Don’t play games. You know what.”

Otto was quiet for a moment, then said, “If I had to pick a side, I would be against it.”

“You would, would you?” Paul sighed. “Why?”

“Firstly, we are simply outnumbered. At present, we can only mobilize fifteen thousand soldiers. We would face an estimated force of seven or eight thousand standing against us at Fort Astora. I don’t need to tell you, my lord, that when laying siege to a fort, it is standard practice to bring a force at least three times that of your enemy’s. A victory for our side would be a tall order,

even considering the difference in morale.”

“Very well...” Paul said. “I might have guessed you’d say as much. And secondly?”

“Logistics, my lord, and let me begin by saying I believe this is an even greater problem than our lack of numbers. While it’s true that the north has stabilized, our supply of rations remains an issue.”

“It’s giving us trouble, is it?”

“Frankly, yes. The United City-States of Sutherland’s economic blockade had the most significant impact on the north. Thanks in part to our reclaiming of those lands from the empire, the common folk likely wouldn’t mount an insurrection at this point. However—” Otto stopped short and stared directly at Paul.

Paul rubbed his bald head, sighing deeply. “I think I see where you’re going with this,” he said. “If we march now, we’ll have to requisition food supplies. It’ll be like throwing kindling on a smoldering fire.”

“Quite so, my lord. And food isn’t the only thing we’re short on.” Otto held out another document to Paul, who took it and read through its contents. Their stocks of warhorses, weaponry, and more—all things they would need in battle—were insufficient. Otto must have seen this conversation coming and put the document together in advance. His organization was phenomenal.

Damn, I wanted a go at them, though, Paul thought, looking back at the original report. There was no question that the Crimson Knights were the weakest they’d ever be, and Paul knew all too well that such golden opportunities came few and far between in war. He appreciated just how difficult it was to get Alfonse to agree to anything, but given the Seventh Legion had now successfully reclaimed both the southern and northern regions for Fernest, he didn’t think it was too much of a stretch to imagine that this might have swayed Alfonse’s sentiments. He suspected that if only Cornelius put in a clever word, there was a solid chance Alfonse would give them permission to mount an attack.

The problem of feeding his people still remained, but there were always the capital’s stores—carting them to the north would take time, but if they

borrowed only what they needed, it would tide them over for now. In which case, Paul thought, he ought to march, even if it meant subjecting the common folk to hardship for a time. At the same time, though, he also knew he ought to be shoring up the political situation here while the Crimson Knights were unable to fight.

“By my calculations, my lord, we have enough to send a force of seven thousand without resorting to requisitioning food from the common folk,” Otto said, as though he could hear the thoughts that plagued Paul. The suggestion was ridiculous, though.

“Otto, have you forgotten what you just said? I would’ve thought you’re a bit young to be going senile, but...”

“Of course I haven’t,” Otto replied. “But as with any situation, there are exceptions.” Then, he smiled.

“You don’t mean...” Paul began, half-despairingly, “not Major Olivia again?”

Otto’s smile grew wider. “Very astute, my lord. Yes, you see it seems that the ‘Death God’ is very well known these days. We can hardly *not* put that reputation to use.”

“It’s one thing to say that, but aren’t you pushing her too hard?”

“Do you think so?”

“Yes, as it happens, I do. As you seem to have forgotten, allow me to remind you. That girl, however strong she may be, is only *sixteen*. Were she a noble’s daughter, she’d be happily enjoying her childhood.” While the rest of the Seventh Legion barely clung on in the Battle of Carnac, Olivia and the Independent Cavalry Regiment under her command had carried them all to victory. To cap it off, they had taken the enemy commander out of commission, leaving the Crimson Knights with no choice but to retreat. They continued to form the core of the Seventh Legion’s pursuit force. Paul appreciated that incorporating an element of fear into their strategy was eminently sensible. In the fight at Fort Caspar, the imperial soldiers had been so terrified of Olivia alone that they had actually rushed to surrender. It was laughable, but it really happened.

Yet Olivia was still only human. Although she was young, Paul wondered how the weariness must be weighing on her. While he saw Otto's point, it was a plan he was loath to agree to.

Otto, for his part, looked at Paul with trepidation. "We're past thinking like that, my lord," he said. "I'm afraid that Olivia just isn't some ordinary girl. She'll skip off to any battlefield we send her so long as we keep her fed. Any concern you feel for her is entirely misplaced."

"'Keep her fed,' Otto?" said Paul incredulously.

"My lord, *please*. Over the past year and a half, our situation has improved dramatically for our army considering the war we're caught up in. Having said that, things remain very touch-and-go. As I told you once before, whether we're talking about a young girl or an old crone—we have to use what we have. That's all." Seeing that Paul's patience grew thin, Otto continued hammering in his point. "Specifically, I thought we could produce banners with the Valedstorm crest—perhaps, shall we say, a hundred or so. All we have to do is order Major Olivia to march with said banners raised. It's inexpensive, and the results should be spectacular." As he finished, another smile tugged at the corners of his mouth. Paul thought idly that considering his nickname "The Man in the Iron Mask," Otto was a man with a surprisingly expressive face.

"We'll have to talk to the field marshal first, whatever we do. Besides, even if we were to put your plan into motion, the star of the show isn't even here."

"Ah, yes. Major Olivia is in the capital, is she not?"

"Aye. Though she should be back before long..." said Paul, sinking back deep into his chair and allowing his eyelids to droop closed.

It was a few days later that the urgent report from Neinhardt arrived, rendering all Paul and Otto's schemes in vain: the Helios Knights were marching out at last.

Chapter Three: An Ebony Blossom in a Perilous Dance

I

The Commander's Camp of the Second Legion, on the Central Front

"They've penetrated the second line of defense, my lord," announced a nervous Captain Lise. "The commander, Major Ignatz, was killed in the fighting. As things stand, it won't be long before the Helios Knights reach the third line of defense."

It was around two weeks since the Helios Knights in their shining silver plate armor had arrived at the central front. Despite the Second Legion's brave resistance, they'd been unable to prevent the Helios Knights from pushing them back.

"These Helios Knights..." Blood muttered. "I can't believe they just strolled through the first and second lines like that."

"They are clearly a cut above the average army."

"Yeah. Their taking Kier Fortress wasn't just a fluke, it seems." Blood stared down at the deployment chart spread out on the long table. The third line of defense was ringed by stone cliffs, and the route it ran along was suffocatingly narrow. The advantage of terrain was wholly on their side, making it the perfect spot for a small force to meet the enemy. "You've got everything ready, right?" he asked Lise.

"Yes, ser. I've had the steel wire strung up across the path we predict they'll take. That'll definitely slow them down. While their guard is down, archers with longbows will shoot off a six-stage volley from above and from the front."

"Good. That should buy us valuable time," Blood said. "But the real question is, what about the reinforcements?" He didn't fail to notice how Lise flinched for a fraction of a second at "reinforcements."

“According to our messengers,” she said after a moment’s pause, “it will be some time before the First Legion is ready to march.”

Blood made a noise of disgust. “So His Majesty told us to go to hell then, huh?”

“My lord!” Lise hissed, aware of the gazes of the other soldiers as she reprimanded his rashness. “Please keep your voice down—you know criticizing the king is punishable by death. You are right to be angry, of course, but *please* remain calm.” Blood only punched a fist into his palm, like he couldn’t care less about the king. Lise hurriedly changed the subject.

“In their stead, if you’ll pardon my interruption, I am told that Major Olivia of the Seventh Legion is being sent to our aid.”

“Major Olivia?” Blood repeated. “That’s that girl the imperials call ‘Death God,’ isn’t it? I thought the Seventh Legion weren’t in a position to leave the north right now?” He had heard the reports of the Crimson Knights’ defeat. Although in and of itself it was welcome news, he also knew that the Seventh Legion had sustained heavy losses. Right now, they had their hands full maintaining control of the north, and Blood was sure even Paul couldn’t spare any soldiers under such circumstances.

“Apparently, by happy coincidence, Major Olivia was staying in the capital. Brigadier General Neinhardt assigned her the mission, and she should be in the process of putting together a militia in the central lands as we speak.”

“A very happy coincidence, that...” Blood muttered, putting a drooping cigarette in his mouth and lighting it. However impressive this girl they were calling Death God turned out to be, he couldn’t honestly say he was eager to entrust her with the fate of the Second Legion. In which case, he had to decide things here and now.

He let out a fierce laugh, as much to bolster his own spirits as anything else.

“My lord?” Lise asked.

“Captain Lise, make sure we’re ready to fall back if it comes to that. I’ll head up the rear, of course.”

“My lord!” Lise exclaimed, her catlike eyes boring into him. Blood knew just

what she wanted to say to him, but he couldn't afford to give any ground here. His honor was riding on this too.

"Don't get cross," he said. "Any general worth his salt would send you all to your deaths for king and country, but I'm afraid I just don't have it in me. Hey, now, don't worry. I'll make sure they know it was all my fault."

"That's hardly what I'm worried about, ser! I—!" Lise began, refusing to back down, but Blood cut her off.

"You've got your orders, Captain," he said, fixing her with a steady gaze. "Repeat them back."

Lise hesitated, then said, "Yes, ser. I will ensure we are ready to fall back."

"Good. Very good."

Lise gave him a listless salute, then left, dragging her feet.



Blood looked out to where the sun was sinking below the horizon.

“The people don’t exist to protect the nation; the nation exists to protect *us*,” he said under his breath, taking another long drag on his cigarette. “That’s what you always said—right, Paul?”

The Cloudy Chamber in La Chaim Palace, the Holy Land of Mekia

Snow blanketed the landscape visible through the Mekian-style windows, glittering so brilliantly in the sunlight that it even outshone the grandeur of the Cloudy Chamber.

“Welcome back, Amelia. I commend you for your fine work on our ‘sympathy visit,’” Sofitia said graciously to Amelia, who knelt before her.

“You give me too much credit, my Seraph. I must admit, I made a mistake.” At this, Lara, standing beside her, shifted ever so slightly.

“A mistake? How very strange,” Sofitia remarked. “I have heard of nothing but your great success.” According to the owl’s report, Amelia’s superb surprise attack had delivered a crushing blow to the Crimson Knights. Though she had naturally sustained losses of her own, they were entirely negligible—nothing that Amelia could rightly call a mistake.

“Yes, everything I’ve seen indicates that your mission was carried out without fault,” Lara cut in, glaring daggers at Amelia. “Thousand-Wing Amelia, I will not have you spouting nonsense before the Seraph!”

“It’s nothing of the sort, Holy Wing.” Amelia looked up to reveal a rare expression of penitence. “While at the fort, I met Felix von Sieger—one of the Three Generals—but I was unable to slay him.”

“Oh, that isn’t anything to worry about,” Sofitia replied. “You were facing Lord Sieger of the Azure Knights. I can hardly expect him to be brought down so easily. Quite the contrary—I should congratulate you on having fought him and still returning hale and whole. Besides, Amelia, you gathered valuable information for us, did you not?”

Of the empire’s Three Generals, Felix von Sieger was the most shrouded in

mystery. As he rarely ever showed himself on the battlefield, the owls had struggled in vain to learn anything about him. Trust Thousand-Wing Amelia not to let a once-in-a-lifetime chance to get information on him slip by.

“Of course, my Seraph,” Amelia replied. Sofitia smiled at her.

“Then there is nothing for you to trouble yourself over. You have distinguished yourself with your service here, Amelia, and for that, you shall be rewarded. Until then, you should rest.”

“Allow me to express my most heartfelt gratitude for your kindness, my Seraph,” Amelia said. She stood up and saluted before leaving the Cloudy Chamber.

Sofitia watched her go, then laughed softly. “See, Lara? Hasn’t Amelia done a marvelous job, just as I said she would?”

“Yes, my Seraph. I can but look in awe at your keen insight,” Lara replied, bowing low. Her shining silver hair fell in waterfalls down from her shoulders.

“You know flattery will get you nowhere,” Sofitia replied. “By the way, a little bird told me that the Helios Knights have marched from Kier Fortress.”

“It is so, my Seraph. I have reports that they are currently engaging the Second Legion.”

“Are they, now...” Sofitia murmured. “While we are on the subject, who do *you* think will emerge the victor?”

Silence fell over the Cloudy Chamber at this question, but it was soon broken.

“The Second Legion’s commander is supposed to be highly capable, but even then, I would pick the Helios Knights nine times out of ten,” Lara said forcefully. “Aside from everything else, the difference in their numbers is too great.”

Sofitia shared that opinion. The soldiers of the Second Legion had to be reaching the limit of their physical and mental endurance. She did have to credit them for having the sheer grit required to hold the central front alone, however. Sofitia wondered if their commander was indeed as talented as Lara said. Sofitia would happily show him any courtesy to entice him to join the Winged Crusaders, if it would work. There was no harm in having more strong

pieces in play.

“So the empire has started to take this seriously at last?” she asked.

“The empire has suffered a succession of defeats as of late. While they still maintain an unmistakable advantage, they cannot afford to turn a blind eye to this state of affairs—something the timing of this makes very clear.”

Sofitia cupped her face in one hand and sighed. “Well, that is *very* bothersome. If the Winged Crusaders involve themselves any further, we risk exposing ourselves...”

The imperial army’s commanders were no fools. They had their own intelligence agents—the shimmers. Sofitia had considered that, at some point, they would arrive at the conclusion that Mekia was behind the surprise attack on Fort Astora, but it would be disadvantageous for the truth to come out now. If they were to clash with the imperial army head-on, they needed time to prepare. On the other hand, if the Second Legion collapsed, they might march directly on Fis. Fernest was one move away from checkmate, and the empire’s dreams of unification had abruptly begun to come true. Sofitia herself was plagued by doubt of how to proceed.

“The Winged Crusaders are ready to march whenever you wish it. What are your orders?” Lara asked, pressing her for a decision. At this, the Seraphic Guardians, the knights who protected Sofitia, all dropped to one knee. The clanging of their armor plates rang throughout the chamber.

“We shall watch and wait, this time,” Sofitia said at last. “King Alfonse surely isn’t fool enough to think he can stop the First Legion from marching now. I can scarcely believe I am saying this, but let us pray to Strecia for the royal army’s victory.”

“As you wish, my Seraph,” Lara said. She raised her left hand to her chest and bowed low to Sofitia, her Adders’ mage circle glittering emerald-green in the light of the chamber.

The Audience Chamber of Leticia Castle in Fis

“Your Majesty, what more can I say to make you understand?” Field Marshal

Cornelius, supreme commander of the First Legion, took a step forward, a look of anguish on his face.

Above the palace, the sun had reached its zenith, bathing the grandiose audience chamber in light.

“I grow tired of this, old man. Do I have to say it again? The First Legion *must not* go into battle. Scarce days have passed since you set out to send guards of the central lands to the Second Legion’s aid.”

When Cornelius first proposed mobilizing the guards, Alfonse had been against that too. He protested that it would naturally lead to civil disorder in the regions they were drawn from, and that civil disorder would lead to unfortunate economic consequences. In the end, though, he had accepted that it was still better than sending the First Legion and had grudgingly given his permission. To now go ahead and send the First Legion anyway seemed to him like a cut-and-dried case of backwards logic.

“Your Majesty, they are but six thousand soldiers,” Cornelius pointed out.

“Six thousand is a full division. Is that not more than adequate?”

“*Your Majesty*. The report from our messengers put the Helios Knights’ forces at forty thousand. Combined with their rear guard, they shall field a host of eighty thousand. Of the Second Legion, only twenty thousand soldiers remain standing. Even with the militia force, it is a vast difference.”

“I thought it was a soldier’s job to be clever with your strategies and your tactics and make these things work. Surely you cannot expect to always meet your enemy on even footing.”

“With all due respect, Your Majesty, all things have their limit. In the case of a small difference in numbers, I should not fault your reasoning. But this time, as I have impressed upon you, that limit has been crossed. Not only that, but our foe is the Helios Knights, and their commander, the most powerful man in the imperial army. I beseech you, my king, to reconsider.” Cornelius stared at Alfonse, with bloodshot eyes and such intensity in his gaze that it was hard to believe he was already well over seventy. Alfonse felt a cold sweat break out on his back.

“What about the Seventh Legion?” he said. “How do you explain their victory over the Crimson Knights?”

The Seventh Legion had snatched victory against overwhelming odds in a series of events that Alfonse thought bore a striking resemblance to their current predicament. Cornelius replied that, for the Second Legion, such a thing was impossible, but Alfonse found this difficult to swallow. Surely such a great gulf could not possibly stretch between the might of the Crimson Knights and the Helios Knights.

“I beg that you do not treat that battle as typical, Your Majesty,” Cornelius concluded. “It was a feat very few could achieve. I myself could not hope to replicate it, should anyone ask such a thing of me.”

Alfonse leapt to his feet, glaring at Cornelius. “So long as you stand at the head of the royal army, you shall not speak thus, old man!” he cried. “Shall I promote General Paul to field marshal then, and demote you to general? What say you to that?” The guards who stood on either side of him gasped sharply, all eyes falling on Cornelius.

There was a long silence, then at last Cornelius opened his mouth. “If you would then give the First Legion leave to march,” he said, “I accept it without question.” He knelt, bowing his head low.

Alfonse, who hadn’t imagined that Cornelius might *agree*, spluttered, “Forget it. I spoke in jest.”

“Well, I shall speak plainly, Your Majesty,” Cornelius said at length. “If the Second Legion falls, it will not be long ere the storms of war bear down upon Fis as well, and that will spell Fernest’s doom. King Alfonse will go down as the last ruler of a kingdom that has endured six hundred years.” He looked up unashamedly as he spoke. He had, in effect, told the king to his face that it would be his fault if—no, when—the kingdom fell. Alfonse felt his blood rising.

“You dare, old man...” he growled. “Even you cannot say such things and expect to live!” He turned to the guard behind him and thrust out a hand.

“Y-Your Majesty?! What are you...?!” the guard cried in alarm.

“Give it to me, at once!”

“I cannot, Your Majesty! Not that!”

“Insolence!” Alfonse wrested the sword from his guard, then turned to Cornelius, who was still kneeling.

“You’re prepared for what happens now, I trust?” Alfonse said. He slowly descended from the dais to stand before Cornelius, holding the point of the blade to the old man’s throat. From behind him, the guards cried out, begging him to see reason. Only Cornelius remained calm despite being held at sword-point, his serene expression only angering Alfonse still further.

“You are sorely mistaken if you think I won’t do it,” he said. Cornelius shook his head almost imperceptibly.

“I am ready to die,” he replied. “I would not see the kingdom fall and my king—Alfonse, that dear child—on the executioner’s block. Do it now, and spare me that agony.” With that, he took his sword from his belt and laid it on the floor, then slowly closed his eyes. The very image of dignity, he did not flinch nor show any fear.

“Very well,” Alfonse said at last. “I am defeated. I shall interfere no more—henceforth, you may do as you please, and know that even if the kingdom should fall to ruin as a result, I shall not hate you for it.” He laid a gentle hand on Cornelius’s shoulder. The old man’s eyes were still closed. So long as he lived, Alfonse would never forget what he saw next. As the great man, the once-feared Invincible General knelt there before him, a single tear ran down his cheek.

It sounds like it’s over... thought Neinhardt as the guards in the waiting area outside the audience chamber sprang into motion to haul open the great doors. As soon as he saw Cornelius, he strode over to him.

“How did it pan out, Field Mar—is everything all right?” he said, coming up short as he noticed the redness around Cornelius’s eyes.

“Eh? Oh, Neinhardt...” said the old man, stroking his long, white beard with one hand while waving him off with the other. “Nothing you need worry yourself over.”

“If you say so, ser...” Neinhardt said dubiously, then asked, “Now, what did His Majesty decide?” He swallowed loudly as he waited for the answer to the question that would likely decide the fate of the kingdom. Cornelius did not answer immediately, but placed a gentle hand on Neinhardt’s shoulder.

“The First Legion will immediately prepare to march. Make sure everyone knows.”

“You mean...?”

“His Majesty has given his permission,” Cornelius said, and a smile broke out across his tired face.

“Wonderful news, ser!”

“In addition, he intends to cede his authority as grand commander of the royal army.”

“He *what?!* ” Neinhardt exclaimed with an uncharacteristic yelp. *Cede his authority.* In other words, Cornelius was now free to command the First Legion however he saw fit. Whatever had happened in there between Cornelius and the king, this was a happily unexpected turn of events.

“I’ll be taking command for this battle. We march with forty thousand soldiers. The remaining seven thousand are to remain behind to defend the capital, under General Lambert’s command. Understood?”

“Down to the letter, ser.”

“Good,” Cornelius nodded. “Have the city raise the banners of the First Legion.”

“Yes, ser!” Neinhardt answered with a magnificent salute.

II

General Headquarters of the Helios Knights, the Central Front

Field Marshal Gladden was in the middle of a war council when a messenger arrived with the news that the First Legion had marched from the royal capital.

“They’ve finally decided to make their move...” he said to himself. Since the

war first began, the First Legion had stubbornly refused to budge from its place defending Fis. Gladden felt a wild rush of excitement at that sleeping lion having roused at last.

“We put their forces at around forty thousand,” the messenger went on. “At present, they’re traveling along the Coborph Pass.” All the assembled officers turned their gazes on the deployment chart spread out in the middle of the long table. Only one mountain stood between the Coborph Pass and where they were now engaging the Second Legion.

“They may be trying to flank us from the rear,” said Major General Oscar Remnand, chief of general staff for the Helios Knights. He traced a route along the map and stopped at the Plains of Nobis, emerging directly behind the Helios Knights.

“Indeed. I suppose they want to trap us in a vise grip while the Second Legion is still standing. A solid tactic, tried-and-true...” Gladden looked around at his officers. “But what do you think of it?” he asked the group at large.

A man sitting on the edge of the group leapt to his feet. He was the youngest officer in attendance, a lieutenant colonel by the name of Alexander Gally.

“Lord Marshal, the Second Legion cannot hold out much longer against us. Surely the best possible course is to crush them now with a decisive blow, then drive straight on to capture Fis!” He continued to ramble on passionately, gesticulating and occasionally brandishing his fist for emphasis. The other officers watched him with long-suffering expressions. They could all tell just how much Alexander loved the sound of his own voice.

“Anyone else?” Gladden asked when Alexander had finished.

“The First Legion is still Fernest’s most dangerous army,” Major General Oscar said. “I think we ought to turn them back here—we should hit them with the full might of the Helios Knights.” All the other officers except for Alexander nodded their agreement. Alexander looked like he might burst out in protest, but Gladden silenced him with a flick of his hand.

“Alexander’s idea isn’t a bad one. We certainly could put an end to the Second Legion in one fell swoop. On this occasion, however,” he went on. “I agree with General Oscar.” Alexander’s face froze with an awkward twitch.

“I wouldn’t dream of disputing your decision, Lord Marshal,” he said at length, “but I would like to know the reason, if I may.”

“You really need to ask?” replied a new voice, rough and tinged with disdain, making Alexander’s face twitch again. “Ten to one, that army is under the command of the Invincible General Cornelius himself.” The voice belonged to a massive giant—Lieutenant General Patrick, a man of forty years who had made a name for himself within the Helios Knights with his long record of courageous service. He had also played a central role in the capture of the impregnable Kier Fortress.

“I know the Invincible General, of course. I lost count of how many times the instructors at the military academy drilled that name into us. But, if you’ll forgive my saying so, he is a moldering relic of a bygone era,” Alexander insisted. “I don’t see the point in the Lord Marshal fighting him directly.”

Gladden’s mouth twisted into a crooked smile. “Youth is precious, yet it may also lead to ruin. You would do well to take that to heart.”

Alexander took this in with an exaggerated frown. “I’m sorry, my lord, but I don’t understand.” He obviously wasn’t convinced, and Gladden stifled a sigh. He had the feeling Alexander would not live a long life. This war, this battle on the central front, would not suffer any fool who so flagrantly underestimated the strength of the enemy.

And though he would not admit this reason aloud to his subordinates, Gladden also harbored a personal desire to cross swords with Cornelius. Cornelius the Hero. Cornelius the Invincible General. The man’s deeds of valor in the wars in the final days of the warlord period numbered far too many to count. As a warrior, it was an honor to stand against him. Gladden’s innermost soul whispered to him that he, as both the most supreme general in the imperial army and a soldier himself, could not allow such a chance to slip by.

“When this battle is over, my meaning shall make itself clear to you,” he said. Alexander grudgingly sat down, and Gladden went on to deliver his orders. “We will restructure our forces. Thirty thousand of the Helios Knights along with ten thousand of the rear guard will go out to meet the First Legion under my command. The rest will continue to engage the Second Legion.” Their force of

eighty thousand would be divided cleanly in two. He placed a higher number of the Helios Knights in his own main force as, naturally, he was wary of the First Legion.

While the officers all nodded their assent, Patrick immediately rose to his feet. "Lord Marshal, I ask to be entrusted with the ongoing assault against the Second Legion." No one objected. Patrick was a coolheaded and unerring commander despite his fearsome exterior, and if allowed to go on the offensive, he could unleash monstrous devastation. All present, therefore, saw this as the soundest course of action.

"Then so you shall," Gladden replied. "I leave the Second Legion to you. But do not underestimate them. There is no telling what a wounded beast may do."

"Yes, ser!" Patrick replied. "Leave it to me. I shall bring the Second Legion to a swift end so that you may give your full concentration to the confrontation with the First Legion."

"I'll hold you to that," Gladden said. Patrick gave a picture-perfect salute. Gladden, still seated, returned it with an approving nod.

The resistance from the Second Legion was more tenacious than he had expected. The commander was no slouch, evidenced by how he had held the central front alone. There was not even the shadow of a doubt in Gladden's mind that Patrick might fail, but he also knew that nothing was certain until the battle was over. No victories in this world were certain.

After the officers had filed out, Oscar, a teacup in one hand, turned to him. "Are you sure about giving command to Lieutenant General Patrick?" he asked.

Gladden, taking a long sip of the hausen tea he was offered, took stock of Oscar's solemn expression. Apparently, the chief of general staff nursed some misgivings.

"You're concerned?"

"It's only a small thing," Oscar said, hesitating only briefly. "The Second Legion's commander has proven himself a master of clever schemes. General Patrick, on the other hand, prefers open, head-on confrontation. It is not a bad quality of his; I just fear it may work against him in this instance."

Gladden was of course well aware of the point Oscar raised, and he had weighed Patrick's suitability for the mission against the man's sheer power when making his calculations. On this occasion, he had simply found power to be the more relevant factor. He trusted Patrick that much.

"Don't worry about that," he told Oscar. "I've taken all that into consideration."

"Then I shall speak no more of it. I'll begin reassigning our forces at once."

"Very good."

"Ser." Oscar saluted, then strode from the tent.

A vicious smile spread over Gladden's face. "This is the battle," he murmured to himself, "where I consign the Invincible General to oblivion."

Second Legion Command on the Central Front

Blood was hammering out his plan of attack with the other officers gathered around the table when Lise came dashing in, panic in her eyes.

She gave them a proper salute. "My lord," she gasped, still catching her breath, "there's been a message from the third line of defense."

"Eh? Didn't we just get that report?" Blood reached into his pocket and pulled out a worn gold pocket watch. Opening the lid told him that less than an hour had passed since said report. He frowned.

"The situation has changed, ser," Lise explained. "The Helios Knights are making an orderly retreat."

"They're retreating?" Blood repeated. After a pause, he added, "We didn't somehow deal them *that* hard a blow, did we?" The last report had said that despite extraordinary efforts on the third line, the imperial army continued to advance undaunted. Blood didn't really believe his forces could have hit the imperials hard enough to drive them to retreat in so little time, but he asked anyway.

"No, ser, there was nothing like that," Lise confirmed. "I'm told Lieutenant Alabaster was also totally thrown by their sudden withdrawal." She herself

appeared at a loss.

“If we didn’t hit them, that can only mean...” Blood trailed off, thinking. The first thing that occurred to him was that something had happened to the supreme commander. If he’d fallen so ill that he could no longer issue commands, withdrawal of forces would be an option they had to consider. His imagination took flight as he wondered if perhaps even Emperor Ramza...

Hah. All right, don’t get carried away, he told himself. In no war he’d fought in until now had he ever known something so convenient to occur. He smiled at his own foolishness, while Lise gazed at him with eyes full of worry.

“Oh, I just wondered if their commander had a heart attack or something,” he said by way of explanation. It sounded even more like wishful thinking admitted out loud. If that were truly the case, the enemy’s retreat would have been frantic, not orderly. Since it was not, it left him no choice but to think that this latest development had some clear intent behind it.

“I can’t rule that out, ser, but I would think it strange given their lack of disorder,” Lise replied, having apparently reached the same conclusion. Blood pulled out a cigarette, lit it, and breathed deep of its smoke.

“So, what else do we think it could be?”

“Well...” Lise began, trailing off. Eventually, she gathered herself enough to continue, breathing quickening as her thoughts did. “It’s possible that Major Olivia’s unit is approaching, is it not? The empire is terrified of her. They may have retreated so that they can regroup before they fight her.”

The other officers looked at one another, their expressions growing brighter by degrees. Blood watched this, feeling sorry for them.

“I hate to trample on your hopes,” he said, “but I seriously doubt it.”

“Why, ser?” Lise asked, and he grimaced at the reproach in her eyes and those of the other officers. He understood their urge to cling on to any scrap of hope.

“Come on. Think about it,” he urged them. “However much this Death God chills their blood, she only has six thousand soldiers. That’s not nearly enough of a reason to justify ordering a whole army to retreat. Though you might,” he

added thoughtfully as Lise's words sparked an idea in his mind, "not be *completely* off the mark..."

"Meaning, ser?"

"Meaning that the Helios Knights did retreat in order to regroup."

"But ser, didn't you just say that wasn't..." Lise began. Realization hit her swiftly. "Oh!"

Blood grinned at her. "You see it, then?"

"Yes, ser! The First Legion must be coming!"

"Exactly," Blood said. Lise pressed both hands to her chest, tears brimming in her eyes. The sheer relief must have loosened her composure, he thought, noting how unlike her it was as he pulled out a handkerchief and forced her to take it.

"Th-Thank you, ser..." she said, clearly flustered. Removing her glasses, she dabbed at her eyes, then gave him a shy smile. Blood, feeling vaguely embarrassed, scratched the back of his head.

All right... he thought to himself. *Now begins the real fight.* If his theory was accurate, the situation had turned in their favor. But it would take time for the First Legion to reach them, and until then, the Second Legion would remain in just as dire straits as before. He couldn't ignore how exhausted his soldiers were after this endless succession of battles.

He cleared his throat, then said, "Captain Lise, your orders. With the enemy retreating, we have an opportunity. Make sure our soldiers get the rest they need."

"Yes, ser."

"And don't forget to see they fill their bellies too."

"Yes, ser!" Lise replied, and Blood felt her voice, clear and bright, ringing in his heart.



III

A day's ride to the northwest of the desert town of Cefim, on an island that jutted up alone at the center of a deep lake, sat Fort Glacia. It was a remnant of the middle warlord period, and, while small, was sturdily constructed. With only a single stone bridge linking it to the mainland, one might have thought that it would be nigh unassailable with a battalion stationed there. At a glance, it seemed a fort well suited to mounting a defense.

Yet the royal army had never once regarded the fort as a valuable location over the course of the war. The reason was simple: should the bridge—the one and only escape route—be blocked, any force stationed there could then be starved out. In other words, the fort was fatally flawed from its conception. The reason their forebears had chosen such a location to build a fort was unclear. In the present day, a procession of high-ranking officers were stationed as commanders there, coming out worse in the military's competition for success and promotion. As the fort served no purpose, it was an ideal place for shunting off unwanted candidates. The soldiers of the royal army mocked it in hushed whispers, muttering the name "Fort Sunset" instead.

Olivia, Claudia, and Ashton checked out from the Ashcrow Inn, and Katerina and Neinhardt came to see them off as they departed the capital. Twenty burly men under Neinhardt's command came with them, clustered around Olivia, who sat astride her horse Comet. Neinhardt had assigned them as bodyguards. When he first suggested it, Olivia had insisted they weren't necessary. She was perfectly capable of looking after herself, as was Claudia. There was no denying that Ashton couldn't survive alone, but he'd be fine so long as she kept an eye on him. She only agreed in the end when she noticed Claudia's thin smile. Now, their horses kicked up clouds of dust as they galloped toward their destination of Fort Glacia.

"That's Fort Glacia, Major," Claudia pointed out three days later as they emerged from a forest road. A cylindrical tower standing in the center of a lake rose into the western horizon where the landscape opened out. The water blazed with scarlet light that seemed as though it might scorch the sky. It was

beautiful, giving the scene an air that bordered on the fantastic.

“Oh wow, it’s so pretty! Ashton! Hey Ashton, look! Isn’t it so pretty? Like a scene from a picture book.”

“We’re not here to appreciate the scenery,” Ashton said, rolling his eyes. “Must be nice to be so relaxed.”

“What’s got you down?” Olivia asked. She’d read in a book that being unable to feel anything when looking at beautiful things was a sign of depression, and relayed this to Ashton. He responded with a deep sigh.

“You can’t expect me to be cheerful when we’re here to fight the Helios Knights.”

“Oh. Okay.”

“‘Okay’?” Ashton echoed. “Olivia, you’re so flippant about everything, it’s like you don’t get nervous at all.”

“That’s what’s so great about me. Right, Comet?” Olivia patted the horse’s neck, and Comet whinnied happily.

“Don’t say that about *yourself*. And don’t go looking for approval from your horse.”

“Haven’t you heard of the concept of the bond between a horse and its rider? On the battlefield, it’s really important that you and your horse are in harmony. That way you can move like the horse is part of your body.” She looked back at the horse and added, “Right, Comet?” Comet whinnied again, and Olivia puffed out her chest in satisfaction.

Ashton groaned in frustration. “I can’t even argue with that because you’re right—I *hate* that. In the end, I still have no idea what my horse is thinking. I can’t even swing a sword properly.” His shoulders slumped and he turned dejectedly back to face the road ahead. Claudia watched all this and smiled.

They rode their horses at a walk along the lake edge, eventually crossing the single stone bridge that connected the fort to the land. At last, Claudia and the others arrived at the gates. Despite having been constructed in the middle

warlord period, the fort didn't show its age—perhaps because it had never once seen battle.

Claudia took a deep breath, then shouted up to the soldiers on the fort battlements.

“I am Lieutenant Claudia Jung, knight of the Kingdom of Fernest! Word should have reached you of our coming! Open the gate at once!”

“Y-Yes, ser! We're opening it now!” The soldiers whispered to each other inaudibly, then disappeared from view. Claudia and the rest of the party dismounted, then waited. After not too long, there was a dull screech as the gate began to inch open. Behind them, a crowd of soldiers stood waiting for them along with a short, plump man.

“Welcome. You've journeyed a long way,” he said. “I am Dominic Eckhart, master of Fort Glacia.” He wore a military uniform that looked like it might burst at the seams at any moment. Three silver stars on his lapel marked him as a colonel.

“We're honored that you would come to greet us yourself, commander. I am Lieutenant Claudia Jung of the Seventh Legion, and this—”

“Oh, I know who this is. The famous Death God, Olivia Valedstorm, is it not?” Dominic said, looking at Olivia with a knowing smile. His manner was the height of disrespect, but he was technically a superior officer. Claudia couldn't say anything back to his face, but her first impression of him was very, very bad.

Olivia didn't seem to mind at all. “Yes, ser! Major Olivia Valedstorm, at your service!” she replied directly.

“Isn't that grand? You know, I heard you were a fine-looking girl, but you're even more stunning than I expected.”

“Am I, ser?”

“Why, you're a one-of-a-kind work of art,” he said, looking her over with a hungry look in his eyes. Claudia heard Ashton make a tutting sound behind her. *I know how he feels*, she thought. *This man is absolutely disgusting.*

She casually moved to stand between Olivia and Dominic, then asked after

the soldiers assembling at the fort. He looked at her blankly for a moment. “Oh, you mean the guards,” he said after a brief pause. “They’re all here already,” he added in a tone that implied it wasn’t anything to do with him. Claudia felt rage blossom inside her, but did her best to keep her face impassive.

“In that case, they shall ride with us at da—”

“Oh, give it a rest, Lieutenant. There’s no call for that.” Dominic flapped his hand, cutting her off. Now it was Claudia’s turn to stare blankly.

“Excuse me? What did you just say, ser?”

“Going deaf, at your age? I said, there’s no call for that.” Dominic drew himself up to his full height, bellowing for the gate to be shut. As if they’d been waiting for the signal, the other soldiers moved as one to surround Claudia and the others. She couldn’t believe her eyes as she saw spears and swords made to be turned on their enemies instead turned on her and her companions.

“Colonel Dominic, what the hell are you doing? If this is some kind of joke, no one’s laughing.” Claudia put her hand on the hilt of her sword, moving once more to protect Ashton who stood behind her, frightened and dismayed. Neinhardt’s men had already drawn their weapons.

“A joke?” Dominic said, chuckling. “I assure you, there’s no one alive who hates joking more than me.” Claudia shot a quick glance about them, finding a hundred or so soldiers around them edging closer to tighten the ring. Thinking back, there had been any number of ominous signs—the suspicious conduct of the soldiers when she’d called for the gate to be opened, the commander coming out to meet them himself as though he knew they were coming, and the soldiers wearing full suits of armor. This wasn’t the first time a traitor had emerged in the royal army, but Claudia hadn’t imagined they could be betrayed by a field officer of all people, least of all one in charge of a fort.

I’m still too trusting, she thought as she activated *Heaven’s Sight* in expectation of the worst.

“May I know why?” she asked.

“Why? You want to know why...?” Dominic asked, then mused, “Well, why not? I can’t resist a pretty face. You know what the soldiers call this fort when

they think no one's listening, don't you?"

Claudia was silent for a moment. "Fort Sunset," she said through gritted teeth.

Dominic nodded, looking positively revolted. "That's right. Despite my prodigious talents, thanks to a spot of bad luck, I ended up packed off here. Do you know how horrible it is here? No good wine, no pretty girls to just reach out and grab..." He shook his head as though this were unspeakably tragic. "It's no better than a prison." His reasons, as it turned out, were unbelievably selfish and childish. Claudia sailed straight past anger into dumbfounded shock.

"You betrayed the kingdom just for *that*?"

"'Just'? You dare to call it *just that*?! You cannot begin to understand how I suffer, locked away here!" Dominic beat his commander's staff on the ground and stamped his foot, his face beet-red. The man beside him, who looked like some sort of advisor, began frantically trying to placate the colonel. Breathing hard, Dominic at last composed himself. "No matter," he said. "Really, I am exceptional enough that I could simply go alone, but if I present to them the Death God's head, the imperial army will surely offer me an even better post. It is no mere coincidence that you have come to me now. There can be no doubt—this is all thanks to my good deeds and the hand of the Goddess Strecia!"

"Um," Olivia chimed in. She looked like she wasn't following any of this. "So, Colonel Dominic is our enemy now, is that what's happening?"

Claudia nodded emphatically. "He has betrayed the kingdom and plans to defect to the empire."

"Ah, okay. Definitely an enemy then!" Olivia replied. She gave a few satisfied nods.

"I hope you'll forgive me," Dominic said with false contrition. "It is a terrible sin to kill such a stunning beauty, yet so it must be. Right now, that head of yours is worth more than a king's ransom. I promise you won't suffer, at le—"

The next moment, it was already over. If Claudia hadn't already activated *Heaven's Sight*, she could never have hoped to see Olivia as the other girl shot past Dominic, faster than lightning. Everything seemed to stop; then, after a

heartbeat passed, Dominic's head toppled off his shoulders to the ground. A gush of bright red blood followed swiftly after, bubbling up like a fountain even as his body slowly crumpled. Everyone, enemies and allies alike, stared open-mouthed as Olivia called out in a voice that rang through Fort Glacia like a bell.

"That's one down! Who's next?"

She rested her sword on her shoulder, blood dripping from its ebony blade, and looked around, clearly enjoying herself. The soldiers surrounding them seemed to at last grasp what had happened. They scrambled to throw down their weapons before prostrating themselves facedown on the ground.

Only fifteen minutes had passed since the revelation of Dominic's betrayal, and Olivia already had Fort Glacia in the palm of her hand.

IV

General Patrick's Army on the Freyberg Plateau, the Central Front

After Gladden appointed him to lead the attack on the Second Legion, Patrick smashed his way through their defensive lines one after another. Finally, he reached what had to be their final line of defense on the Freyberg Plateau. After he broke them here, marching on the royal capital would no longer be a mere dream.

"So, this is where they've chosen as their grave."

"Yes, ser. We've finally got them pinned down."

Patrick's aide, Major Ares, gazed out at the sea of Second Legion banners. The Gold Lions, each with two stars, fluttered in the distance.

"I thought they'd never run out of those sneaky tricks. It made me sick, if I'm honest."

Patrick found great meaning in an honest, head-on battle, but he could hardly force his enemies to comply. Yet using steel wire to impede the enemy army's advance, reversing the flow of a river to create a perfect bog, then turning around and setting absurdly simple pit traps—these were so far from honest warfare as to deeply wound the honor of the perpetrators themselves.

To Patrick's surprise, though, Ares replied with admiration. "Ser, I must disagree. There is no beauty in war. Ensnaring your enemy—and being ensnared yourself—are all of a piece in battle. The enemy general is intimately familiar with the demands of war—I'd be happy to have him in our army."

Patrick snorted. "Aren't you just full of praise for our enemy?"

"I have no reservations about praising brilliance, even from an enemy," Ares replied. He was also a tactician, and a teacherly expression graced his features as he went on. "It's perfectly natural, ser."

"Would you stop harping on about every little thing?" Patrick exclaimed. "You always talked too damn much!"

Ares shrugged with a sardonic smile, which only made Patrick sigh. He looked back at the Second Legion, its soldiers assembled to form a triangle. "A flying wedge, at this stage..." he said. "They mean to fight to the bitter end, then."

"Unlike us, the enemy should be close to the limits of exhaustion..." Ares said, unspoken meaning dripping from his every word. Patrick didn't miss the implication.

"Hah. Unless I'm much mistaken, they've guessed that the First Legion has come to their rescue." In order to prevent the Second Legion catching wind of the First Legion's approach, Gladden had sent out reconnaissance agents over a wide area to cut off their sources of information. If the Second Legion still retained the will to fight, they must have guessed it anyway.

"It would seem so, ser. Oh, well. It's not as though we were relying too much on that."

Patrick looked at Ares and snorted. "Obviously. All respect to Marshal Gladden, but we never needed any spies in the first place. We'll hit them head-on and crush them—there's no need to exploit their vulnerabilities."

"Setting that aside for the moment, what is our plan, ser? Standard practice would be to send out a number of units ahead to see what the enemy does."

"What a stupid question. You know what I'm thinking, don't you?"

"As a rule, you are rather easy to read, my lord," Ares said, a smile tugging at

his mouth. The man never knew when to shut up, but he was an excellent soldier, and Patrick valued that highly.

“Shut it. In my army, we always go at them! I’ve got no patience for observing the enemy. If they’re coming at us in a flying wedge, we’ll use a crane formation to surround and exterminate them.”

“I shall begin preparations at once,” Ares said. He turned smartly on his heel and headed for the runner’s station.

Second Legion Command, the Freyberg Plateau on the Central Front

“The calm before the storm...” Blood muttered. Here on the Freyberg Plateau, the Second Legion’s final line of defense, the two armies faced off in silence. Blood and Lise, though both bone-tired, closely studied the scene. Three long weeks had passed since their battle with the Helios Knights began. The arrival of the First Legion had drawn away the bulk of the enemy force, lightening the Second Legion’s burden significantly. Even then, their third and fourth lines of defense had been penetrated, and they had lost a prodigious number of soldiers. Although their spirit was not yet broken, Blood could clearly see that they were quickly reaching their limit.

“My lord, the enemy is moving,” Lise said. Blood nodded. Before him, the enemy army fanned out on both sides into a crescent moon shape. Their maneuvering was polished and efficient, and the formation was quickly completed.

“A crane formation...”

“Presumably it’s in response to our wedge formation?”

“You’re probably right. They worked out we still have some fight left in us and mean to put an end to us in one blow.”

“How are we going to counter them?” Lise asked, her expression bleak. She too knew they had no hope of winning this fight. Even if they couldn’t win, however, they could still refuse to lose.

Blood was quiet for a moment, then said, “If a crane is to soar, it needs both its wings.”

“In other words, if we take out one of their flanks, we can temporarily incapacitate them,” Lise replied at once.

Sharp as always, Blood thought, privately amused. Out loud he said, “Exactly. Wretched as it is, all we’re capable of right now is buying time and praying that the First Legion emerges victorious in the meantime.”

Without needing to be told, Lise relayed orders to each of the runners while Blood lit a cigarette and looked on. A thread of smoke coiled up into the sky.

“Major Olivia’s unit still hasn’t arrived.” Lise made the remark suddenly after she’d finished with the runners. “We could really do with even one more ally right now...” They’d received word that Major Olivia was on her way to them, but she had yet to appear.

“Maybe if she had a real army, but at the end of the day, they’re just a slipshod militia.”

“You think she’ll have problems with discipline?”

“I think it’s very possible.”

“But they might also already be close at hand,” Lise insisted. Blood nodded.

“You may be right. But in any case, I wouldn’t count on it.” Six thousand reinforcements did sound very appealing at the moment, and usually Blood would have welcomed them with open arms. But in many ways, undisciplined soldiers could do more damage than an enemy. A misstep could lead to a breakdown in the chain of command, and even the ultimate collapse of the army. Blood, therefore, had complicated feelings on the matter.

“All right, time for us to get moving. Just because we’re only buying time doesn’t mean we have to wait for our enemy to get themselves into position. Let’s go for their right flank; they were a bit slower.”

“Yes, ser!” Lise replied. At Blood’s command, the Second Legion began to advance on the enemy’s left flank.

A fierce battle raged on. The moment Patrick saw the Second Legion advancing on his right flank, he sent heavy infantry with great shields to stand

at the front. The unit commander gave the command and the soldiers moved into position as though choreographed to form a solid wall of shields. This was the Helios Knights' favored defensive tactic: the high tower formation.

"This is a tough nut to crack..." Blood muttered. After initiating the attack, he soon realized that the enemy defense was too solid and changed his tactics. Now, they focused their attack on the enemy's right flank. Any common commander would have pushed on with the original plan, but it was this ability to instantly change tack that had won Blood the command of the Second Legion.

"They're fast. Don't let them draw you in!" Patrick shouted, immediately sending soldiers from the center out to bolster the left flank.

The battle between the two brilliant commanders wore on, neither taking the upper hand.

Two days after the battle began, the Second Legion first showed signs of fraying. The Helios Knights took this momentary lapse and used it to tear through one corner of their defenses. Patrick, at his best when on the offensive, didn't waste any time, commanding his army to charge through the hole they'd opened. Meanwhile, Blood sent word to Lieutenant Reiner to close the gap and immediately dispatched soldiers held in reserve. The enemy read his intentions, however, and the reserves were ambushed before they reached their destination. With this, the direction of the battle was decided.

"My lord!" Lise shouted.

"Looks like they don't plan to wait for us to close the gap. I'll be damned, their commander certainly isn't a slouch." Blood ran his fingers roughly through his hair and grimaced.

"This isn't the time to be impressed!" Lise snapped.

"As you say. With this, it's only a matter of time until they break us. And after that, all that's waiting for us..." Blood paused, his expression dark. "I think you know the rest."

"Then..." Lise said, her thin lips faintly trembling.

“I’m afraid it’s time. The Second Legion is to withdraw, then head for the Dale of Kasthall to the east. You should be able to mount a solid defense there. I’ll stay here with three thousand soldiers to keep the Helios Knights pinned down.”

It was Colonel Carlheinz who replied. “Yes, ser! We won’t let you down!” he cried spiritedly. He was a resourceful soldier and a good fighter. The plan was for him to join Blood in the rear guard in the event that the Second Legion had to retreat.

“Ser,” Lise said fiercely, pushing her way forward. “Please, allow me to stay by your side until the end.” Her strikingly blue eyes burned with intensity behind her glasses, and Blood knew she wouldn’t back down. He laid a hand gently on her narrow shoulder.

“You can’t,” he said. “The fight doesn’t end here. Captain Lise, you are my aide, and it is your duty to see that as many of our soldiers as possible get out alive. That’s an order, understood?”

“There are others who could do it—Major General Adam, for one,” she protested. “Besides, as your aide, I have the right to refuse an order if it is totally absurd.”

Blood looked at her. “First I’m hearing of it. Is that really in the code of conduct?” He thought back to his hazy memories of the military academy, but couldn’t remember anything of the sort. More to the point, if such a rule *did* exist, he would have made good use of it during his stint as aide.

“It isn’t. I just made it up,” Lise said brazenly. Her face was dead serious. Amidst the imminent danger of their situation, Blood couldn’t help but burst out laughing.

“That’s some nerve!” he said. “If you can joke like that at a time like this, you’ll be all right.”

“I’m not joking, my lord. I will fight at your side to the last,” Lise said, then softly closed her eyes. “And I will die at your side.” When she opened her eyes once more, a smile blossomed wide on her face like a flower—but not a flower that sought to draw him in; on the contrary, it looked so fragile that a touch could scatter its petals.

Blood's face twisted into a hard expression that rarely ever graced his handsome features. "That's enough, Captain. Our deaths aren't set in stone yet, and I for one don't plan to die here. I told you before. I'm not the sort to die for my country."

"In that case, I have no objections," Lise replied. Her smile was pure now, as she drew close to Blood. A scent, sweet yet somehow faint, wrapped around him.

"Lise," he said at last. "Please listen to me. There's not much time." Lise didn't reply. "Lise? Lise, are you hearing me?" Still, she said nothing, only stared out at some point behind Blood as though in a daze. As though pulled her by her gaze, Blood turned around, then laughed. "*Now they show up?*" he said. "And damn, what an entrance."

A ray of light shone through a gap in the clouds to where, on the crest of a hill, there stood a girl in glittering, ebony-black armor, like a hero of legends. Beside her rose a banner upon which was drawn a skull upon two great scythes, fluttering majestically in the breeze.

V

The banner of House Valedstorm fluttered in the breeze over the far hill. Claudia clasped her spyglass in a white-knuckle grip, her shoulders quivering with repressed emotion, as she turned her gaze away from it.

"Good," Ashton said to himself, looking pleased as he surveyed the scene. "Sergeant Major Ellis actually looks very convincing, standing there all majestically. They can't miss the banner either. Yes, I think that should fool the imperials."

"Ashton Senefelder," Claudia said, her voice utterly devoid of emotion.

"Yes?"

"I've got a question for you."

"Wh-What is it?"

"It's about our body double for Major Olivia. I didn't think you'd do the armor,

let alone have her dye her hair, but what I want to know about is *that*. Where did *that* come from?" Claudia pointed at the banner like she suspected it of murdering her parents. Close inspection revealed that a vein in her temple throbbed, and the spyglass crunched unpleasantly under her iron grip.

Olivia quietly backed away from the two of them.

"What? Didn't I say, Lieutenant?" Ashton asked.

"You did not. I wasn't told anything about *that*," Claudia said, her face blank. She turned to Olivia. "Major, were *you* told?"

Olivia *had* been told, as it happened. Or to be more accurate, she was one of the culprits behind its inception. When Ashton had brought the idea to her during their stay at Fort Glacia, she'd enthusiastically agreed to help make the banner. Chatting and joking while working with others to make something was a new experience for Olivia. And what a wonderful, happy time it had been! The militia soldiers were full of nerves and jitters at first, but by the time the banner was complete, everyone was totally at ease. When the topic of Olivia's double was raised, Ellis volunteered right away, nearly panting in her excitement.

"Ser, oh, ser! Please pick me!" she'd cried. Why she'd kept staring at Olivia as though spellbound, though, Olivia wasn't sure.

Later, Olivia exercised her authority to authorize the distribution of Dominic's hidden stash of food and alcohol, and the party really got going. For some reason, they'd all gathered round her at the end and started tossing her into the air, but Olivia happily went along with it. She would treasure the happy memories she'd made that night.

"Um, yeah, he did tell me," Olivia replied, nodding stiffly. Claudia's eyes narrowed. Despite the warmth of the day, Olivia felt a strange chill run down her spine.

"I see, ser. So I was the only one who didn't know about it, then..." Claudia said, half to herself, then turned back to Ashton. "Ashton, you still haven't answered my question."

"Well," he began anxiously, "I suppose it was just before we left Fort Glacia."

"Was it really?! You made *that* in only half a day, did you?" exclaimed Claudia,

folding her arms and nodding along as she went on. “Yes, even from here, I can tell it’s a fine piece of work. You must have really toiled away.” Her face remained empty of expression, and Olivia felt a tension in the air like the calm before a storm.

“Do you think so, Lieutenant?” Ashton said, becoming cheerful. “It’s true, it was a tremendous effort. But thanks to all the guards pitching in, it turned out splendidly.”

“Oh, very good,” Claudia remarked dryly.

“They worked particularly hard on the scythe blades,” Ashton went on. “Aren’t they drawn well? They look like they could chop your head clean off.”

Olivia watched him as he went on with the explanation, remembering how, just the other day, he’d told her off for never reading the room. Reading the room was, as Olivia understood it, about sensitively perceiving the people around you, something Ashton was patently failing at right now. She wondered if her noticing this fact was a sign of her personal growth.

Claudia sidled casually up to Ashton as he went on, oblivious. Then, she seized him by the shoulders and began to shake him hard, bellowing, “You little *scumbag!*” she roared. “You enjoy this, huh? You enjoy tormenting me?!”

“Wha—?!” Ashton squawked. “It’s nothing like that! It’s just capitalizing on Olivia’s infamy—er, I mean, her great renown! Look, it’s stopped the enemy in their tracks!”

As his head lurched back and forth, he jabbed a finger frantically toward the base of the hill. Olivia got the vague feeling that he’d said something rude about her, but he was right about one thing: the enemy army had come to a standstill. Even from this distance, they could tell how the banner held the army’s attention.

Olivia clapped her hands to draw the other two’s attention. “Are you two almost done?” she said. “As Ashton says, the enemy isn’t moving. This is the best chance we’ll have to save the Second Legion.”

Claudia, panting hard, replied, “Ye... Yes, ser! And allow me to say, ser, I’m truly sorry you had to witness that!” Then to Ashton, she added, “Don’t you

think this is over, Senefelder! I'll talk to you *later*."

"Seriously..." Ashton, free from Claudia's clutches at last, readjusted his collar before he turned to Olivia. "Everything's gone according to plan so far. What's our next move?"

"Everything I've seen confirms the Helios Knights' prowess in formation tactics. On that count, they're a notch above the Crimson Knights."

But where the Helios Knights excelled in group strategy, the Crimson Knights excelled in a far greater caliber on the individual level. Olivia explained that the Helios Knights' strength was in how the whole army moved like an individual soldier.

"So that's it. It's true, there's a greater all-round finesse to their maneuvers when you compare them to the Crimson Knights. That was apparent right away, even to me," Ashton said.

"Yeah. That strength will become their weak point, though. Isn't it funny how the world works sometimes?"

"'Their weak point'?" chorused Ashton and Claudia together. They looked at one another, then both turned away again awkwardly.

Claudia cleared her throat, then said, "How exactly is it a weak point? To me, they look totally invulnerable..."

"I agree with Lieutenant Claudia," Ashton said. "Breaking that defensive formation will be nigh on impossible."

"Huh. Is that how it looks to you?"

"It doesn't to you, Major?"

"Nope. To me, it looks like the Helios Knights are too used to fighting in formation. That means if we take out their commanders, the army will totally lose its ability to adapt."

"So what you're saying is," Claudia said, "we target the unit commanders and disrupt the chain of command, and that will put us on track to win?"

"Yep, that's the idea." Olivia squatted down, then, picking up a fallen twig, drew a large circle on the ground. Ashton and Claudia followed suit, crouching

down where they stood.

“First is just what we talked about at our last meeting,” Olivia said, drawing a smaller circle facing the larger one. “Ellis, dressed as me, takes a unit of three thousand soldiers to draw the enemy out on the right. Not so far that they notice the trick, of course. Then”—she drew another small circle—“you two, along with two thousand soldiers, take the opportunity she creates to rush them from behind. The final thousand soldiers will come with me to charge the enemy on the left.” She added a final small circle.

“Next, we let the Second Legion know about the plan. Their general is supposed to be brilliant, so while we draw the enemy away, I bet he’ll be able to regroup his forces. What do you think?”

“If all goes well, we’ll be attacking them from all sides...” Ashton mused, staring thoughtfully at the diagram on the ground. “I like it.”

“That all sounds good to me, Major,” Claudia said, nodding her approval as well.

“Then that’s settled! Let’s get a runner off to the Second Legion right away, then it’s time for us to get moving.”

As one, Ashton and Claudia stood up and saluted, shouting, “Yes, ser!”

Olivia gave her orders, and with that, the operation commenced.

Patrick’s Command

Patrick listened to the disquieted muttering from his army with rising irritation.

A woman with silver hair and clad in ebony black armor had suddenly materialized up on the hill. She stood gazing coolly down at them, with a black banner emblazoned with a skull over two scythes raised beside her. There was no doubt in anyone’s mind that here before them stood the imperial army’s most dangerous enemy—Death God Olivia.

“My lord, it’s—”

“You don’t need to tell me,” Patrick spat. “There’s only one person who’d fly

that ghastly banner.”

“It’s her, then. Death God Olivia...” Ares said under his breath. Nervous sweat beaded on his brow.

Patrick had not at all anticipated seeing Death God Olivia, who belonged to the Seventh Legion, here on the central front. He too had read the report submitted by Colonel Guyel that some of the officers now referred to as *The Death God Journals*. She was a fearsome opponent, not only manipulating the Crimson Knights into a trap, but also badly wounding Rosenmarie of the Three Generals. However, Patrick also saw a golden opportunity here to wipe Death God Olivia from this world for good.

“Ares, send word to Major General Kristoff. Tell him to take seven thousand Helios Knights to meet the Death God’s unit.”

“Seven thousand?!” Ares exclaimed, his eyes popping. “That’s almost all the knights in our army!” This, his reaction said, was not standard procedure—it was entirely abnormal.

“You heard me. We mustn’t skimp on the force we send to meet the Death God and her soldiers. The Helios Knights are to hold nothing back, and keep her from having free rein on the battlefield.”

“But ser, the Second Legion are still standing. If we divert almost all the knights...” Ares trailed off. He didn’t protest directly, but from his tone, Patrick knew he didn’t like the plan.

“Got an objection?” Patrick asked.

“Well, that would be a blunt way of putting it,” Ares said at length.

“Don’t worry. There’ll be no problem so long as I take the main force and crush the life out of them.”

“My lord, I can’t go along with this,” Ares protested. “Even with the Second Legion on its last legs, the increased danger you face is too great.”

Patrick well understood Ares’s fears. Obviously, the danger to Patrick weighed heavy on his mind. But what his aide was afraid of was that, if something did befall Patrick, the whole army would fall apart.

Throughout all of history, no army had ever lost its commander and still emerged victorious. The southern area army's collapse after the death of General Osvannes was a prime example of this. It was a reasonable concern for an aide to have.

"What a funny thing to say," he said, his lip curling. "Tell me, then. Is any battle guaranteed to be safe and free of risk?"

Ares sighed. "I'm well aware that I speak out of turn when I say this, but that is *not* what I was saying." He opened his mouth to elaborate on his concerns, but a man from Patrick's personal guard stepped forward and interrupted whatever it was he might say. It was Sieghart, the captain of the guard.

"Major Ares, your concerns are valid, but you need not trouble yourself," said Captain Sieghart. "Should the general find himself in danger, we will be there to give our lives in his defense as his guard." At this, the other assembled guards knelt.

"Well, you heard the man," Patrick said. "Besides, I'll make it out alive so long as I have this." He drew the scimitar at his waist with a dramatic sweep, holding it aloft for all to see.

Sunlight caught on the edge of the blade, making it shine with a dim luster. The sword was a real work of art. The merchant who'd brought it to Patrick had explained that it was both fine and exceedingly rare, brought over the sea in ages long past from another continent that might or might not even exist. Where other swords were double-edged, this blade was single-edged and curved back on itself. The merchant touted the blade's merits with total conviction, and indeed, its edge was phenomenal. Smitten at first cut, Patrick paid the exorbitant sum the merchant had asked for it.

Ares looked up at the sword, his eyes narrowed against the glare. Then, he clicked his heels and saluted. "Very well, my lord. I know you won't alter course once your mind is made up. I'll have the orders delivered to Major General Kristoff."

"Tell him to be on his guard. We don't know what tricks the Death God may try."

"Yes, ser!"

The Decoy Unit

As she watched the Helios Knights moving, Ellis couldn't stop a gloating smile from spreading across her face.

"Here they come—they think I'm Olivia and now they're all worked up! Do I *really* look that much like her? Maybe people will mistake me for her little sister." She giggled. A blond, blue-eyed man stood beside her, watching the Helios Knights with his arms folded—her brother, Second Lieutenant Luke.

"You're hopeless," he said, rolling his eyes. "Can you save the happy-go-lucky attitude for when we're *not* staring down the enemy? And not just any enemy—the Helios Knights under one of the empire's Three Generals! This isn't like when we were fighting bandits and things like that. Plus, you're like five years older than her, so I don't know what you mean by 'little sister.' Are you feeling all right?" He reached out to check her temperature, but Ellis violently swatted him away.

"Shut up! Who cares if she's younger than me?" she grumbled. "Anyway, quit moping around here and go out there and attack them already!"

When Olivia had entrusted her with this crucial mission, it had sent Ellis's heart soaring higher than ever before. Never had she felt this way amongst the tedium of guarding towns and subduing bandits. The outcome of this battle, in Ellis's mind, now rested upon whether she could draw out the enemy. Thus, her own role was of the greatest importance. She, disguised as Olivia, was at the core of this whole battle.

Luke watched her dubiously as she clenched her fists.

"What?" she said. "Overcome by my beauty or something?"

"You've got some overinflated idea that this whole battle is resting on you, don't you?" he said. When Ellis's only response was to click her tongue in frustration, he went on. "Got it in one, huh? You're so easy to read. What, did you think you were a real commander now?"

"I can think whatever I want," she muttered.

“You’re just a body double for Major Olivia—no more, no less. Also, you might be my little sister, but I’m still your superior officer, so you’d better address me properly when we’re out in public.”

He’d seen through *everything*. And as much as it irked her to admit it, he was right on every point. Just because he was right, though, didn’t mean she had to accept it.

She chanced another loud tut, then saluted smartly. “Yes, ser! Please forgive my many transgressions, *Second Lieutenant Luke*, and allow me to rephrase my earlier suggestion: get out there and intercept the damn enemy, *ser*,” she finished, pointing at the Helios Knights. She heard a muffled laugh from the soldiers behind them. Just then a trumpet sounded. The enemy was in range of their archers.

“I can’t even with you,” Luke groaned.

“What? Got a problem?”

“Whatever.” He turned to the waiting soldiers. “All archers, begin three-stage volleys! Meet any who break through with your pikes. We have the high ground, and we’re going to squeeze all the advantage we can from it!” A roar of assent rose up. Turning back to Ellis, Luke added, “And you make sure they don’t see you for the dumb girl you really are.”

“*Hey!* That’s mean, jerkface!” Ellis retorted, but he ignored her. He raised his left hand, and the soldiers, waiting for his signal, raised their axes above the logs they’d felled in preparation for this moment. They cut the ropes holding them back, and the logs went thundering away down the slope toward the Helios Knights.

The Second Legion

Almost all the Helios Knights were changing course, heading to the hill occupied by Olivia’s unit. Blood watched them with the dawning realization that his assumptions had been off the mark. The imperial army was far more worried about Olivia than he’d imagined. His crooked smile grew wider. Here on the battlefield, he only received bits and pieces of information, but even so... He should have known better.

“There’s a messenger from Major Olivia, my lord,” Lise announced, cutting through his reverie.

The messenger stepped forward. “Ser, I’m here to tell you that the unit over there on the hill is a fake.”

“A fake?” Blood exclaimed. “What does that mean?”

“Well, ser, that’s what I’m here to explain.”

As the messenger began to outline the plan, Blood’s eyebrows rose higher and higher. The woman he’d thought was Olivia was a decoy, the runner told him, while the real Olivia was laying low on the hill on the opposite side of the battlefield.

Lise, just as surprised, cried out thunderstruck. “What?!”

The messenger continued. Major Olivia planned to lie in wait, then launch a surprise attack from the enemy’s rear and flank when the time was right. Olivia also apparently wanted the Second Legion to regroup and mount a counterattack while the false Olivia’s unit drew the enemy away. If the plan worked, they would have the enemy surrounded. If so, even a small force would be enough for him to hold out. Blood felt sure of that.

Blood watched as the messenger galloped away again, then called Lise.

“You hear that?” he said. “Major Olivia has the cheek to come here and tell us to regroup while her people lure the imperials away. And to sweeten the deal, she wants us to mount a counterattack! Quite the impossible task we’ve been handed, eh?”

Lise chuckled. “But Major Olivia clearly thinks not for *you*, ser. And she is absolutely correct.”

“You think so?” Blood said. “There’s not a scrap of evidence to back up that assertion, though.”

“Evidence? Of course there’s evidence,” Lise said. She sounded so confident that Blood felt his interest piqued.

“Oh yeah? Even with the man himself telling you in as many words that

there's not?"

"Yes, ser. You'd be surprised how much we don't realize about ourselves."

"There's truth in that," Blood conceded. "All right, will you tell me, then?"

"I know you can do it, because I believe that you can do it," Lise replied without hesitation. "Beyond a doubt." Her gaze didn't waver as she looked straight at him. Avoiding her eyes, Blood looked away and scratched his head.

"Um, well," he muttered. "From what I can see of the soldiers over on the hill, Major Olivia has got her militia moving like a proper army. I don't know how she did it, but it looks like she's the real deal."

"Major Olivia's plan is already in motion," Lise pointed out. "We can't sit here doing nothing."

"Agreed. The commanding general of the Second Legion can't allow some upstart major to leave him in the dust. Captain Lise," he began, but she got in first.

"We assume a circle formation, with the wounded soldiers on the inside," she said.

Blood laughed, shaking his head. "That's right, Captain," he said. "That's what we'll do."

With Olivia's entry onto the field, the Battle of the Freyberg Plateau approached its finale.

Claudia's Ambush Unit

After receiving Olivia's orders, Claudia and Ashton took their forces around to the rear of the imperial army. They succeeded in avoiding attracting the enemy's attention, but another problem had presented itself.

"Hmmm." Ashton stared up at the crown of the hill in a state of uncertainty. "That's an unexpected development."

The Helios Knights laying siege to the hill numbered more than twice as many as the three-thousand-strong decoy force holding them back.

The imperial army wasn't taking any chances against Olivia, that much was clear. As much as Claudia might have despised the "Death God" nickname, she couldn't deny that Ashton's plan had worked any longer.

The problem was that it wasn't really Olivia up on the hill. She more or less knew how to swing a sword, but apart from that, she was just another soldier with dyed hair and special armor.

"This is all because you had her wave that banner around," said Claudia. "Those knights outnumber them more than two-to-one. Even with the advantage of terrain, the decoy force can't hold on for long, and before long the attackers will see through the disguise. So," she announced, her voice dripping with sarcasm, "what should we do, *o all-knowing tactician?*"

Ashton, looking troubled, scratched absentmindedly at his cheek. "I admit that I was overly optimistic. The reputation of the Death God is even more ingrained than I thought. But that means—"

"Their main force's defenses will be even lighter. Right?" Claudia interjected. Ashton's eyes went wide for a moment, then a smirk spread over his face. Though it was irrelevant to the matter at hand, Claudia found herself thinking that she'd rarely seen a man who suited such an expression less.

"What was the sarcasm for, if you already had it worked out?" Ashton teased. "That's just mean, Lieutenant."

"This is only happening because your misjudgment *happened* to turn into a favorable situation, and don't you forget it," Claudia snapped. Ashton had a keen eye for his surroundings, but it was people like that who failed to look at the ground under their own feet, and people like that who died first in a battle. Especially when they couldn't even swing a sword properly. It was up to Claudia, therefore, to watch out for him instead.



“Don’t worry, ser,” Ashton said, “I’m not that big-headed.”

“I hope not. Anyway, what *are* we going to do?”

“It’ll be hard on them, but we have to leave the decoy force to hold the Helios Knights there for a little while longer. Right now, it’ll be even easier to get in and take out their commanders. There’s no way Olivia will miss that opportunity.”

“Then we can’t afford to waste any more time. Let’s get moving.” Claudia turned back, then raised her sword high and announced to the soldiers standing rank-and-file, “We charge the enemy’s rear! This is our chance, while the bulk of their force is locked in on the decoy force. I want to see you fight with the bravery of lions!”

A roar of “Yes, ser!” rang out as the soldiers, as one, punched their fists into the sky.

At Claudia’s command, the two-thousand-strong infantry unit began to advance on the main force of the imperial army.

Olivia’s Ambush Unit

Olivia gave a small sigh, then returned her spyglass to its holster at her waist. She’d been watching the decoy unit. Just as Z had told her, a battle was like a living creature. It wouldn’t go where you needed just because you wanted it to.

Beside her, also peering through a spyglass, stood Warrant Officer Evanson, a blond man with indigo-blue eyes.

“This wasn’t what we predicted,” he said, sounding taken aback.

“Yeah, it looks like almost all the Helios Knights went for the decoy unit,” Olivia agreed. “Battles are volatile like that. There’s nothing you can do about it. Still, that’s all their planning gone up in smoke. I guess the imperial army *really* wants me dead. It’s hard being so popular!” She laughed cheerfully, and Evanson returned a strained smile.

“Not popular in a good way, then. Not that I agree, of course. Thanks to this, the defenses on the main force have thinned out. It does mean that my older

brother and sister over in the decoy unit have just found themselves with much more dangerous jobs, though.”

“You’re Ellis’s little brother?”

“I am, more’s the pity...” Evanson said, with an embarrassed laugh. Olivia didn’t know what was a pity, but now that she looked at him again, she could see a hint of resemblance. He had Ellis’s prettiness, just a masculine version of it. When Olivia first left the Gate to the Land of the Dead, all human faces had looked the same to her, but now she’d learned to properly tell the difference. That had to be another sign of her personal growth.

Evanson was looking at her a little dubiously, so she asked, “What’s up?”

“Huh?! Um, nothing, I...” he replied, tripping over his words for some reason. “I just wondered. My sister, she didn’t say anything rude to you, did she, ser? She told me you made the banner together...”

Olivia tilted her head at him. “No, I don’t think so. I really enjoyed talking to her,” she said. “Oh, actually, she did say her little brother wet the bed until he was twelve. I suppose that was you.”

Evanson looked outraged. “That... That jerkface! Why would she even bring that up? Please forget she told you that, ser. There wasn’t anything else, though?”

“Anything else...” Olivia said, thinking back. “Oh! Now you mention it, she did just sit there and *stare* at me from time to time.”

Evanson sighed dramatically. “I thought so...” he said. “Don’t let it concern you, ser. It’s a kind of affliction she suffers from.”

“I’m not concerned or anything. But she’s sick? Have you taken her to a healer?” Olivia inquired. Ellis hadn’t seemed unwell chatting away next to Olivia at the party. On the contrary, she’d practically bowled over everyone around her with her enthusiasm. Olivia knew from her reading, however, that illness came in many different forms. Someone could look perfectly healthy while they were anything but.

“Um, not exactly,” Evanson muttered evasively. “If it were a proper illness like that, maybe something could be done about it. But the healer said there was

absolutely no chance of curing her.” He glanced around nervously as he spoke, his voice growing smaller and smaller until at the end Olivia could barely make out what he was saying.

“Are there illnesses that aren’t proper illnesses?” she asked curiously. “You mean it’s not in any books?”

“Well, you probably won’t find it in a book, but it’s better if you just don’t ask. Better still if you just don’t think about it all, actually.”

“Huh. Okay,” Olivia replied. If he told her not to ask, it was probably best to leave it alone. There were lots of things in the world one was better off not knowing. She remembered learning that the one repairing the stove when she broke it wasn’t Comet the Fairy, but Z using magic. That had been one of those things she wished she didn’t know.

As she reflected on such old memories, Olivia noticed a messenger coming toward them, breathing hard.

“Lieutenant Claudia’s infantry battalion is storming the imperial army’s rear!” the messenger cried.

“Thanks,” Olivia said. Then, with admiration, added, “Claudia’s on it, as usual.”

“Should we make a move as well, ser?” Evanson asked, his face solemn.

“Right, yeah. We can’t dilly-dally, or the decoy unit’s going to get pulverized.”

“How should we time the charge?”

“I’ll keep an eye on things, so wait for my command. Evanson, you make sure you’re ready to spring into action at a moment’s notice.”

“Yes, ser!”

It was crucial that they attacked while the enemy’s guard was down. Thanks to Claudia’s ambush, the imperial army had been plunged into confusion, but Claudia only had two thousand soldiers. Making effective use of the ambush at a tactical level would require her to not only carefully read the situation, but also to listen closely to how the battle *breathed*.

Mulling over Z’s lessons in her mind, Olivia issued her commands to the

waiting soldiers.

Claudia's Ambush Unit

Thirty minutes had passed since their attack began. Claudia's forces were unyielding as they pushed forward in an incessant assault on the panicked imperial soldiers.

"Everything's...going well..." Ashton panted. "I don't see any...Helios Knights...either." He was surrounded at all times by a team of burly bodyguards who kept a close eye on their surroundings. They had all been chosen after passing Claudia's rigorous examination. Ashton, it was fair to say, was the brain of the Seventh Legion. She had to keep him safe, no matter what.

"Don't get comfortable yet," she said shortly, then urged their soldiers forward again. Across the battlefield, trumpets blared, and the voices of fighting soldiers blended together in a deep rumbling like an earthquake. The sheer vigor of her soldiers was pushing the imperials back as they retreated again and again.

Everything changed, however, when one huge imperial soldier came forward, filling the gap his allies had left behind. He wielded a black club, leaving the broken bodies of Claudia's soldiers in his wake as he cleaved them with it left and right, again and again.

This is bad. If this goes on, the battle will swing back in the empire's favor... Claudia thought. *Which makes it a perfect opportunity for a test run.*

She gave the order for her soldiers to fall back, but she didn't go with them. Instead, she faced down the huge, blood-splattered man.

"You're going to fight me, pip-squeak?" he said. He looked disappointed as he shook the coagulating brain matter from his club and scoffed, "What a joke."

"Stop yapping," Claudia said dismissively. "You're nothing more than a means to an end."

"A means to a what? What's that supposed to mean?"

Claudia didn't bother answering him. She lowered her weight, then imagined

a single, unbreakable thread, stretching away into the distance. Once, she had feared this power within her and pushed it away. But now she was going to use it.

She called all of it up, then simply dashed straight forward.

First it was *Heaven's Sight*, and now she embraced *Swift Step*.

"Ngh—?" the man grunted. He turned, confused, to look behind him, a gaping hole in his side. The next moment, there was an explosion of blood as his guts came spilling out.

"Hyaaaagh!" He fell heavily to his knees. He died weeping, trying to scoop up his fallen entrails.

I couldn't cut him all the way in half... Claudia thought, looking at him. *I'll need to do a lot more work if I want to keep up with the major.*

She turned around and saw Ashton pointing at her, gaping in astonishment. He wasn't the only one. Every person on the battlefield wore a similar expression.

Claudia didn't pay them any attention. She briskly brought her sword level, then ordered her forces to resume the advance.

Patrick's Command

Two hours had passed since Patrick had sent out his main force. The Second Legion should have been at death's door, but despite his forces' perpetual assault, it was still holding out. That the Second Legion held out one step from the brink began to irritate Patrick.

"They're regrouping in a circle formation, ser. They're going fully on the defensive."

"I can see that. Defense won't bring their dead soldiers back, though. There'll be chinks in their armor. Focus your attack on those."

"I don't disagree, ser, but I'm not sure it will be so simple. Their general is highly competent, and now that he's exclusively focusing on defending..." Ares trailed off, sounding doubtful. Patrick snorted loudly, then pointed his spyglass

at the hill. It was slow, but the Helios Knights were advancing. Kristoff was doing well, just as Patrick had expected.

Just as I thought. Even the Death God is struggling, he thought. *She'd better be, after I sent almost all our knights to her.*

He'd just gone back to working out his plan to break the Second Legion's defense when a commotion broke out in the rear guard. Just as he turned to look, a runner came sprinting up to him, heaving for breath.

"My... My lord!" he gasped. "The enemy! They came at us from behind out of nowhere! Now they're bearing down on the main force at furious speed!"

"They came from behind?!" Patrick exclaimed. "How many?"

"Around two thousand, ser!"

"Two—" The pieces slipped into place. "That's the Death God's independent regiment. The *nerve*." Without thinking, he snapped the commander's staff in his hands clean in two. At Sieghart's command, his personal guard moved swiftly in around him.

"You don't think," Ares said nervously, "that the Death God predicted we'd send all the Knights after her and split her forces?"

Patrick shook his head. "I don't know. I don't know, but if she did, that's some devilish ingenuity. Or maybe I should say death god-like."

"How do we respond?"

"There's no need to panic. Send the remaining knights to the attackers. Give them a good, long look at the ironclad defenses of the Helios Knights."

"But ser, the main force's defenses are only..." Ares stopped, then said, "Very well. I'll give the command."

Patrick glanced at him, but Ares only cleared his throat, then immediately moved onto relaying orders. In minutes, a thousand Helios Knights moved off.

Thirty minutes later, a new messenger arrived.

Patrick let out a bellow of rage. "The Death God is on our left flank?!"

“Yes, ser! They’re rapidly cutting through our soldiers and heading this way!”

“I’ve never heard anything so stupid! The Death God is up on the hill! The Helios Knights have her pinned down!” Patrick shouted, showering the messenger in spittle as he pointed over at the hill. The messenger didn’t acquiesce to him, however. Instead, he stepped forward as though to confront him.

“B-But, she has silver hair and ebony black armor—the spitting image of the Death God in all the stories! Damn it, no ordinary human can cut a man clean in two!” the messenger shouted back hysterically, his face pale. He was so shaken that he forgot himself and cursed in front of his commander. He should have been reprimanded for that, but given the content of his outburst, they all only stared at him in confusion.

“So what, there are *two* Death Gods now?” Patrick shouted back, incandescent with rage. “You expect me to swallow that cock-and-bull story?”

“Ser,” Ares said quietly, “there’s only one explanation I can think of.”

“Explanation?! *Explanation?! Well, spit it out already!*”

“One must be the real Death God and one a fake.”

“A real one...and a fake one?” Patrick repeated.

“It appears that the Death God has had us wrapped around her finger this whole time,” Ares said with a desperate laugh. Patrick only stood there, gobsmacked, until they heard screams of pain rise up from the soldiers nearby. Patrick turned toward the sound just in time to see a girl with silver hair emerge through a spray of blood. In her right hand was a black sword wrapped in coiling black mist, and her armor bore the ugly mark of a skull over two crossed scythes.

At the sight of her, the messenger screamed in terror and ran, tripping over his feet as he went.

“We’re heeere!” the girl announced, grinning to show sparkly white teeth as she surveyed the scene before her. She looked, at least to Patrick, like a predator staring down its hapless prey.

“Protect the general!” Sieghart bellowed. His personal guard was already moving, the soldiers drawing their swords as they advanced aggressively on the girl. She dodged every one of their blows, moving with the grace of a petal fluttering on the wind. Then, without mercy or pity, she beheaded the first with the ferocity of a wild animal.

The strike came so fast and so out of nowhere that the guard didn’t even have the chance to cry out. His blood sprayed through the air like a rain shower while his body, reduced to little more than soulless lumps of meat, crumpled to the ground.

By the time the girl came to a complete stop, every member of Patrick’s personal guard lay dead around him. In mere moments, the girl had summoned hell itself into the mortal world. Even after that level of exertion, she wasn’t even out of breath.

“You... You monster!” Ares burst out, unable to contain himself.

The girl looked at him. “I’m not a monster, I’m Olivia,” she said. “You know, it’s been a while since anyone said that to me! The ‘Death God’ name’s really caught on lately. Oh, but don’t worry! I actually don’t mind ‘Death God,’ so feel free to call me that.”

The girl—Olivia—smiled guilelessly at them. After the unbelievable display she’d just put on for them, it was ruthlessly apparent that this was the real Death God.

“My lord, you have to get out of here, *now*. I’ll buy you time,” Ares said.

“Shut up, Ares. You know it’s pointless,” Patrick said quietly. Ares stared at him, incredulous.

“But ser, we have the numbers...”

“It won’t do any good. Fifty soldiers wouldn’t be enough to stop her. She’s on a whole other level.” Now he understood just how Rosenmarie had sustained her injuries. Patrick had complete confidence in his blade, but what he’d just seen had ripped that confidence to shreds.

The only person he could imagine overcoming her was Felix of the Azure Knights.

“So we’re going to sit here and wait to die?” Ares demanded, lowering his voice ever so slightly. Whatever emotion was causing his shoulders to tremble like that, Patrick knew it wasn’t fear. He smiled darkly.

“Don’t get ahead of yourself,” he said. “I’m not having us go down without a fight.” With that, he drew his scimitar. At once, Ares drew his own blade.

“Then I shall fight at your side with what little strength I have. The rest, we must regretfully leave to Marshal Gladden.”

“After I made that big speech at the war council, it’s pathetic, really...” Patrick said. “On which note, Ares, I’m relying on you to make sure I don’t get lost on the way to the land of the dead.”

“Of course, ser. Leave it to me.” Their eyes met and they smiled.

“Are you done?” Olivia asked.

“We are. Sorry to keep you,” Patrick replied conversationally.

“I thought I’d ask, just in case. You don’t want to surrender, right? If you surrender, I’ll let you live. I told the Crimson Knights the same thing.”

Patrick hadn’t expected Olivia to offer him the chance to surrender. He was genuinely taken aback, especially as he couldn’t imagine that she was trying to trick him at this point.

“Sorry to answer with a question, but did the Crimson Knights *accept* your offer?” he asked.

“Nope.” Olivia shook her head, and Patrick gave a fierce laugh.

“Then, it definitely wouldn’t do for the Helios Knights to accept.”

“Okay,” Olivia said. “Well, time for you to die, then.”

Ares charged, pointing his sword straight at Olivia. She knocked the blade down, wasting no time as she stabbed her black sword through his stomach. He vomited black blood, but didn’t back down. Quite the opposite, in fact—he stepped forward to further impale himself on the blade.

“What?” Olivia stared at him, her eyes wide with confusion. When Ares reached her, he wrapped his arms around her waist.

“Now!” he yelled, his voice like a death rattle. “Stab her through me.”

“You got her!” At once, Patrick brought his blade level, then rushed forward as fast as his legs would carry him, putting his full weight behind the strike—

“Huh. That was a sacrifice play, right? Not a bad idea, in theory. You need to get stronger if you want to restrain me, though.” Olivia snapped Ares’s neck with her left hand. His eyes rolled back in his head as she left him broken, then plunged the blade in her right hand deep into Patrick’s chest.

“Ares... I’m... I’m sorry...” Patrick gasped. All the power rushed out of his body, and his head fell forward onto his chest. As his vision grew dark, he heard Olivia’s cheerful voice in his ears.

“I couldn’t help but notice earlier, but that sword of yours is a really unusual shape. Do you mind if I keep it?”

Patrick never answered her.

VI

Command of Kristoff’s Army

With the terrain against them, Major General Kristoff’s division of the Helios Knights were at first content to commit themselves to defense. But as the distance between the two armies narrowed, the true might of the Helios Knights became more and more pronounced.

While the fighting continued, Kristoff’s aide, Captain Maschera, came to him with a frown on his face.

“My lord,” he said, “the Death God’s force is nowhere near as strong as we’d heard. I know we have twice their numbers, but even so, I’m a little taken aback. I can’t fathom how they were able to dominate the Crimson Knights.”

“You think so too, Maschera?” Kristoff asked.

“Yes, ser.”

“Truthfully, I was just thinking the same. There’s something subdued, even passive in how they fight. And I can’t work out why the Death God is hanging

back there.”

The stories all said that the Death God was the type to actively place herself on the front lines, but although several hours had passed since the fighting commenced, she hadn’t once come forward. Kristoff, gripped by an unnameable sense of disquiet, had kept a wary eye on her and concluded that, without a doubt, something was off.

“I think we should push forward, Lord Kristoff,” Maschera said.

“Agreed. If the Death God isn’t going to fight, perhaps we ought to see this as an opportunity.”

One after another, his impatient officers came to him all expressing the same opinion: they should go on the offensive. Kristoff, who was already thinking that if he didn’t do something, it was going to start to impact morale, decided to take their suggestions and put them into motion.

Just then, a messenger appeared before him, swaying on his feet and covered in blood. He brought shocking news.

“No! General Patrick is dead?!”

“Yes, ser...” the messenger replied. “The Death God was too much for him...”

“The Death God?!” Kristoff said, taking a step toward the messenger. “We’re fighting the Death God here!” His officers experienced an even more devastating shock. It was hard enough to believe that anyone could have killed Patrick—now there were *two* Death Gods as well? It was insanity.

“I don’t know the details, ser, but I can confirm the Death God was there. She brought the Second Legion back from the brink of destruction. Our main force is fleeing in a state of panic. It won’t be long...” The messenger faltered but pushed on. “It won’t be long ’til she gets here. You have...to retreat...with all haste...” He didn’t get any further. Blood spouted from his mouth as he collapsed facedown to the ground, several broken arrows protruding from his back. He was dead before he hit the ground.

His officers stood frozen in dismay. For Kristoff, all his doubts had melted away in a flash.

The passivity of the enemy force. The Death God hanging back from the front line.

It all makes sense now... he thought, feeling hysterical laughter bubbling up within him and unable to hold it back. His officers watched him, apprehension on their faces.

“We’ve been had!” he cried. “Our Death God is an imposter.”

Maschera was dumbfounded. “An imposter? But then who are we fighting?”

“A decoy, I presume. They’ve led us on a dance, tricking us into giving them time.” Another chuckle escaped him. “Oh, we’ve really bungled this, haven’t we?”

There was a pause. Maschera was the first to break the silence. “Then there’s no time to waste,” he said. “We need to retreat before we’re caught between attackers on both sides.”

His suggestion aligned with what accepted military practice dictated, and the hard lines on his face spoke to the gravity of their situation. But something in Kristoff balked at the idea of slinking away in disgrace from a fight. The House of Raptor was a proud warrior family, and as heir to that line, he had his honor to consider. He couldn’t run away.

“Get into an arrowhead formation. We’ll break through the enemy’s center, then escape down the other side of the hill. On the way, I’ll take off the imposter’s head, as a souvenir.”

“Ser, assuming that’s even possible, there’s no point in killing the imposter now. We ought to focus on retreating,” Maschera protested, but Kristoff wouldn’t hear it. He snorted in disgust.

“Point? Who cares about the point? This disgrace will tarnish the reputation of the House of Raptor. You have your orders. Now get the soldiers into formation.”

With reluctance, Maschera replied, “Understood, ser.”

Command of the Decoy Force

The Helios Knights reformed into an arrowhead formation. Together they charged forward, not unlike an avalanche, aiming to pierce the center of their ranks. Ellis watched them coming from her place on the back lines beside Luke, who bellowed out commands.

“They finally noticed that we beat their main force, huh?” she observed.

“Looks like it,” he said, spitting in disgust. “They’re trying to break through us and escape. And we were so close to catching them in a vise.” Ellis wasn’t used to hearing such frustration from her older brother. He usually put on a show of cool rationality. He must’ve been nearing his limit.

The battle had progressed in their favor at first, but now it was all they could do to not be totally overrun. Even without the advantage of numbers, the Helios Knights far outclassed the decoy force. It was only a matter of time before they fell apart.

“Luke,” Ellis said, “I’m going to get their attention. Keep them occupied until Olivia gets here.”

“Don’t be an idiot. Once they know you’re a fake, they’ll kill you first.” His tone was blunt, but the fear in his eyes was plain.

Eris gave an exaggerated shrug. “Hey, you know I’m no slouch with a sword. I don’t plan on going down easy. Besides,” she added, “even if I *do* die, Olivia won’t let her little sister go unavenged.” Before Luke could stop her, she drew her sword. “See you around.”

“H-Hold on!” Luke shouted, but she was already running full tilt toward the oncoming attackers.

Kristoff cleaved through the enemy soldiers in his way, looking for the opening that would let them break through. Then, his lip curled. He saw a silver-haired girl in ebony armor, her sword flashing as she threw herself into the fray. When she noticed his gaze, her eyes gleamed as she began to head straight toward him.

“My lord,” Maschera said warningly.

“Don’t worry about me,” Kristoff said, dropping another soldier who rushed at

him with a single sweep of his sword. He shook the blood from the blade, adding, “You focus on breaking through, or their reinforcements will be after you.”

“But ser...”

“Stop worrying. If she were the real one that’d be one thing, but this girl’s only an imposter. Do you really think she’s a match for Kristoff Raptor?”

“Of course not, my lord, I only...” Maschera trailed off, then said, “Very well. Until later, then.” He ran off, right past the woman in the black armor, but she didn’t so much as spare him a passing glance. A moment later, she drew within reach of his blade, and the clang of metal on metal rang out. They exchanged a few blows, then bounced away from one another again.

Kristoff made a noise of approval. “You’re not bad—for an imposter,” he said.

“Oh no, you worked it out?” The young woman ran a hand through her hair, looking dejected, but that quickly changed as a fierce smile spread across her face.

“You really had us by the nose,” Kristoff went on. “Thanks to you, we’re retreating before we even achieved anything worthwhile. I figure, at the very least, I’ll take your head home as a consolation prize.” Far from being intimidated, the girl giggled mockingly. Something about her smirk struck a nerve. “Something funny?” he snapped.

She heaved a melodramatic sigh. “Okay, so you’re supposed to be a commander in the Helios Knights, aren’t you?”

“What’s your point?”

“Okay, so that was a very impressive speech, but really, you’re just mad because we made you look stupid. Now you want revenge. It’s not like killing me has any other value to you. At least if you went after my brother, that’d show a little more sense.” She scoffed, then gave him a look of pity. “So pathetic.”

Kristoff had never been so insulted in his life. No one had ever dared to even speak so to him.

“Let’s do this then,” he snarled, gripping the hilt of his sword so hard his nails dug into the leather of the hilt.

Maybe I got a bit carried away with the insults, Ellis thought as she parried another of Kristoff’s frenzied blows. *If he keeps this up, I’m in trouble.*

The man’s scarlet face was contorted with rage. The impact of his blows echoed through her skull as she parried him blow for blow. She was keeping up for now, but she knew she couldn’t keep this up much longer.

Right, guess it’s all or nothing from here on out. Ellis drew back, pulling a knife from her belt and hurling it at the man’s face.

“Is that all you’ve got?” With a flick of his longsword, the knife bounced away. Just as Ellis had hoped. She stepped in, meaning to rake his side with her blade, only to find herself staring into his smirking face. A moment later, she understood why he was smiling.

“Ngh...” she grunted. Not only had he deflected her blow with a dagger drawn too fast for her to notice, but his longsword was also now buried deep in her thigh.

He laughed. “Hurts, does it? Well? Does it?” With a flourish, he withdrew his blade. Hot blood poured from the wound as a wave of blinding pain sent Eris staggering. She fell backward.

“Well, then,” he said, looming over her. “I let you have more than your say, but it appears this is it for you. You have some skill with a blade, I’ll give you that, but in the end, you fight like a woman. No force behind your strikes.” He was enjoying his victory. Ellis gave him her best look of contempt in return. She was going to die on her own terms. She wouldn’t be reduced to sniveling and begging.

“Look at you, all excited over beating up a lone woman. Just kill me already and spare me the speeches. Have your friends never told you what a little girl you are?”

“Hah! Brazen to the end, aren’t you? I respect that.” He raised his sword high above his head.

I'm sorry, Olivia, Ellis thought, closing her eyes, *it looks like this is the end for me...*

But the blow never came. Something wasn't right. Ellis cracked her eyes open just enough to see—and there, forcing the man's sword back, was a girl with silver hair.

"Olivia?! My sister really came for me?!"

"Sorry I'm late," Olivia replied with a laugh, then stopped and cocked her head. "Wait, sister?"

Ellis sat wrapped in a cloud of happiness as a man with blond hair came sprinting over to her.

"We...We made it..." he gasped. "Thank goodness. Try not to do anything else stupid."

Ellis huffed. "Oh, it's *you*, Evanson. I don't recall giving you permission to come and ruin my happiness."

"Ellis, please," Evanson said, sighing. "Could you keep your...*symptoms* under control?"

The man fighting Olivia chuckled. "You're the real Death God, then? Yes, I suppose it'd be absurd to compare you with *that*." He made a dismissive gesture at Ellis. "You have an entirely different air about you."

"Yeah?" Olivia replied. "Well, whatever, I guess. Evanson, look after Ellis, okay?"

"Yes, ser!" Evanson replied smartly.

The man chuckled again. "All business, aren't you? To think I'd meet the real Death God here... Fate must have brought you to me. Hear me, Death God Olivia. On the honor of the House of Raptor, I will end you here."

He jumped a pace back, then crossed his dagger and longsword before him. Presumably, this was his preferred fighting style. He charged at Olivia with still greater force than he had demonstrated against Ellis, prepared to unleash a whirlwind of blows—

Yes! That's my amazing big sister! Ellis had never seen Olivia fight at such

close range before. She was so entranced she even forgot the pain in her leg. She'd struggled just to keep up with Kristoff's blade, but Olivia made it look effortless. She parried every strike one-handed. Kristoff, who hadn't even lost his breath while fighting Ellis, was soon soaked in sweat, his shoulders heaving as he gasped for air.

Ellis thought of herself as a fairly competent fighter. Precisely because of that, she couldn't begin to imagine how much she would have to train to get anywhere near Olivia's level.

"Your strikes are very weak," Olivia commented.

"My...strikes? Weak?"

"Yeah. No weight behind them at all. Are you eating properly?" She sounded concerned.

Kristoff's face contorted even more dramatically, and it was only with concerted effort that Ellis managed to contain her laughter. It was too good, after he'd disparaged her attacks for being too weak, too feminine, to see the same line thrown back in his face. No words had ever sounded so sweet.

"Look, we need to get Ellis medical attention, so is it all right if I kill you now?"

"Is it all right?!" Kristoff bellowed back. He raised his sword once more. In response Olivia flicked the blood from her blade, then, unbelievably, returned it to its scabbard.

Then, she turned to Ellis and, while Ellis herself watched in bewilderment, crouched down calmly beside her. Evanson was gaping wordlessly, fumbling for his sword.

"Olivia!" Ellis cried.

"No need to panic," Olivia said. "I already got him." She reached into her bag and pulled out a tourniquet and a bandage. Behind her, as if on cue, Kristoff's body split into two right along the centerline of his body, one half falling left and the other right. It was almost comical. Ellis and Evanson only stared, both at a total loss for words.



Chapter Four: The Battle of Nobis

I

The sun sank low beyond the horizon, casting red light over the broken arrows and notched blades that littered the blood-soaked earth of the Freyberg Plateau. A flock of bone-picker birds with their poisonous magenta plumage circled in the sky above. The pale forms of slavering dusksight wolves flitted in and out of the shadows of the dim light between the trees. Tonight, they would feast to their hearts' content. There was more meat to be had than they could possibly devour, so copious were the dead that covered the ground, blotting out the surface of the plateau.

After Olivia's forces drove away Patrick's Helios Knights, they rendezvoused with Blood. While cheers rang out around her from the soldiers of the Second Legion, Lise gasped when she saw the beautiful young woman with pale blonde hair who stood at the front.

"Captain Lise Prussie, how good to see you again," the woman said solemnly. "I don't believe we've met since the commissioning ceremony at the military academy."

"You too, Claudia Jung," Lise replied. "But I thought you were with the First Legion?"

"I was transferred to the Seventh Legion a year and a half ago. Now I have the honor of serving as Major Olivia's aide."

"I didn't know," Lise said. "But Claudia, why are you being so stiff? Here we are, meeting for the first time in years, and you're talking like we're strangers." She pouted prettily.

Claudia, unruffled, replied, "It's only natural, ser. I am a lieutenant, while you are a captain. You are my superior officer."

“Well then, here’s an order from your superior officer,” Lise said, grinning. “You are to talk to me just as you did back at the academy.”

Claudia’s eyebrows twitched. “Crafty as ever, I see,” she said at length.

“And you’re the same hardheaded dork”—her eyes went to Claudia’s waist—“married to your sword.”

“Hmph. ‘Dork’ is a bit harsh.” They stared each other down for a moment, then, laughing aloud, they embraced.

Blood supposed they must have been classmates at the military academy. Watching their happy reunion, he remembered his own departed friends, Lindt and Latz.

After their brief embrace, Lise stepped back from Claudia, her face set, and bowed her head low. “Without you, the Second Legion would never have made it out of here,” she said. “Thank you. Thank you so much.”

“Stop that!” Claudia bellowed. She sounded almost angry. “We go to the aid of our allies! That’s nothing special.” Lise slowly looked up, her expression a mix of exasperation and relief.

With a small laugh, she said, “You’re as painfully earnest as ever. It’s comforting, in a way.”

Claudia huffed, averting her eyes uncomfortably. “I’m hardly going to turn into a different person in a few short years.”

Lise brushed back a strand of hair that caught on her ear, shooting Claudia a teasing smile.

“I hate to interrupt your reunion, but we do have some things to discuss.” At Blood’s interjection, Claudia scrambled to salute.

“I beg your pardon, ser! Please forgive the delay, and allow me to introduce Major Olivia!” With a slightly boastful air, she ushered forward a girl clad in ebony black armor. It was adorned with the crest of a skull over two crossed scythes, just like on the banner. A buzz of excited voices rose up from the gaggle of officers crowding around to get a look at her.

Olivia stood up straight, then, with a satisfying click of her heels, she saluted.

“It’s an honor to make your acquaintance, ser! I am Major Olivia Valedstorm.”

Blood returned the salute, while privately marveling that the much-discussed Death God stood here before him. “I’m Lieutenant General Blood Enfield,” he replied. “First of all, you have my wholehearted gratitude for coming to our aid.”

“Not at all, ser! Your gratitude is appreciated!”

“You know, your decoy was very pretty herself, but she’s nothing compared to the real thing,” Blood observed without thinking, staring openly at Olivia. Just then, he felt a sharp jolt of pain. Looking around in confusion to the source of the damage, he realized that Lise was pinching the skin of his right hand, an icy smile on her face.

“Captain Lise...?” he stammered.

“Isn’t it nice, ser, that Major Olivia is so *very* beautiful?” she said. “Young too. Do you plan on taking up lechery in addition to your duties as general?” Her smile grew wider, and before Blood could attempt to defend himself, she snorted, and looked away.

Olivia, looking up at him, only said. “Yeah? Um, I mean, do you think so, ser?” She didn’t affirm or rebuff him, just responded automatically. But then, an exceptional beauty like her was probably used to comments like his. She didn’t appear to be totally unaware of her beauty, but what really caught Blood’s attention was something else.

“What’s this? You don’t seem comfortable with all our military formalities,” Blood commented with a wry smile.

Olivia nodded fervently. “Yes, ser. It’s all so weirdly complicated.” So he’d been right. Olivia probably felt suffocated by the unbending rules of the military. He ought to know—he felt just the same. The fact of the matter was that military life didn’t suit him.

“I’ll be honest with you, Major. I feel the same way. You can speak however you like with me.”

“What, really?”

“That’s what’s more comfortable for you, isn’t it?”

“But Colonel Otto always said I absolutely have to be respectful at all times to superior officers...” With a particularly grim expression she added, “He always says it like it’s some sort of curse.” Apparently, it was something she’d had thoroughly drilled into her. Listening to her, Blood saw how her superiors might be exasperated with her. Disrespecting a superior officer was strictly forbidden in the military. At the same time, what Lise had said to Claudia was true—the Second Legion’s rescue was entirely down to Olivia and her forces. Compared to that, proper terms of respect no longer seemed very important.

“Colonel Otto?” he asked.

“You don’t know Colonel Otto? He always looks like this.” She banished all emotion from her face. That expression on her put him in mind of an artwork by a master sculptor.

“Ahhh, the Man in the Iron Mask. He’s with old Paul, right? I can imagine he would give you a hard time. He’s basically a walking copy of the military code,” Blood said, remembering Otto’s scowl.

“You think so too?!” Olivia gasped. She leaned toward him, her uncannily black eyes sparkling. “Oh man, I’ve thought that for *forever*.” There was so much intensity in her gaze that Blood found himself leaning away.

“Well, um, pretty much. Anyway, I can’t stand this formality stuff either, so I’ll call you Liv.”

“Liv...” Olivia said thoughtfully, then smiled, flashing white teeth at him. “Sure! That works,” she said, nodding. Lise, frowning hard, interjected, pointing out that they had to set an example to the soldiers, but Blood only smirked at her.

“Oh? You know, only a few hours ago I’m sure someone else was here twisting the military code to suit her. Who was that again? It was something about an aide having the right to refuse orders from her superior...”

Lise widened her eyes in puzzlement. “What an outrageous notion,” she agreed. “Someone really said something so absurd?”

There was something almost refreshing in how brazenly she feigned

innocence. Off to one side, Claudia sighed and rolled her eyes. Given she didn't know the particulars of this situation, Blood assumed this wasn't the first time she'd heard such a thing either.

He decided to get the conversation back on track. "Anyway. Going forward, I'll need Liv and her forces to temporarily join the Second Legion. I know it's a drag, but we've taken a serious lashing." Only twelve thousand of the Second Legion's soldiers remained. The Battle of the Freyberg Plateau was over, but they didn't have the luxury of enjoying their victory yet. If they were going to join the First Legion, he needed Olivia's forces with him. Blood was only mentioning it as a courtesy—as far as he was concerned, the matter was already decided.

"I'm fine with that," Olivia said, nodding without any apparent concern.

Blood nodded back to her. "I appreciate that," he said. "Right, Major General Adam?"

"Yes, ser!" said Adam, stepping forward.

"I'm giving you two thousand soldiers. Take our wounded and get them safely back to Fis."

"Understood, ser!" He was a man of around fifty summers, and spoke with vigor. Though he had no showy victories to his name, he was a tough old soldier who could face down even the direst of situations with a clear head. It was in no small part thanks to him that the Second Legion had held on for so long while on the brink of collapse. Blood trusted him to handle whatever happened, even if the scattered and retreating enemy somehow managed to muster a counterattack.

"The rest of us will regroup and head straight to join the First Legion. I want everyone to march. Let's go." As Blood finished, everyone sprang into motion. Olivia stood up as Claudia made to leave, but Blood called her back. "Hey, Liv?"

As she turned, he lunged. His sword was already in his hand by the time he had her in range, blade flashing up with the speed and precision to catch a bird on the wing straight toward Olivia's neck.

Time seemed to stand still. With Blood's sword at her throat, Olivia replied

calmly, “Yes?”

A pause, then Blood smiled apologetically and said, “It’s nothing. Sorry to draw on you all of a sudden like that.”

Olivia cocked her head, nonplussed before Claudia, alarmed, hurried her away. The petrified onlookers seemed to come back to life, their frozen shock replaced with expressions of confusion.

“My lord?” Lise asked tentatively. “What was that...?” She seemed just as bewildered. Of course, he had just drawn his sword on the woman who’d saved the Second Legion from certain destruction, so her reaction was eminently understandable.

“Sorry if I alarmed you,” Blood said. “I just wanted to check something.”

“Were you...” Lise’s tone became accusatory. “Ser, were you *testing* her?”

Blood returned his sword to its scabbard with a shrug. “That’s right. But now I get it. I see why the imperial army is so scared of this one girl.”

“Not having seen her fight, I can hardly comment...” Lise said dubiously. “Is she really all that?”

“You saw what just happened, didn’t you? When I drew my sword on her, she didn’t even twitch.”

“Yes, of course I saw it, but surely Major Olivia was merely too taken aback to react?”

What she said was plausible. People weren’t good at reacting to anything outside what they expected.

People struggled to react to anything they weren’t expecting. The shock made their minds go blank and delayed their next actions. Blood was confident that with the strike he’d just demonstrated, he could dispatch almost any opponent before they knew what hit them.

There were probably some who could keep their wits about them to react quickly. But Olivia didn’t fit into that category either.

“That’s not what happened,” Blood said. “The moment she saw me coming, she knew that she didn’t *need* to move.”

“Are you sure, ser?”

“What would I lie for? She knew exactly how my blade would move, and so she knew that it wasn’t going to touch her.” He rolled up his sleeves and showed Lise his arm. “Here’s the proof.”

“Your hair’s all standing on end...”

“Now you get it, right? My instincts are telling me I should be terrified of her. If she ever turned against us, well. Even if we had a hundred lives to spare, it wouldn’t be enough. Whoever called her ‘Death God’ had the right idea.”

“Even you couldn’t beat her, ser?” Lise asked, awe in her eyes. Blood thought her question was a bit off the mark. They were at war, which was a clash between nations, not individuals.

“One-on-one? I wouldn’t have a hope in hell. The difference in our skill is too vast.”

Lise looked disbelieving. “However strong she is, surely she can’t be that...”

Blood shook his head. “It’s kind of you to overestimate my abilities so, but I guarantee you, it’s true. What sort of training she must have gone through to reach that level at her age...” He put a cigarette in his mouth, lit it, then let out a smoke-filled sigh. He could still see Olivia, walking away from them. Even at this distance, she seemed to tower over everyone around her.

II

The First Legion under Marshal Cornelius and the Helios Knights under Marshal Gladden—eighty thousand soldiers in all—faced off across the Plains of Nobis. For the Royal Army, this was the site of the demise of the Fifth Legion. For the Imperial Army, it marked the beginning of the empire’s ascendancy.

Marshal Cornelius gave responsibility for the center lines, where the fiercest fighting was expected, to Brigadier General Neinhardt. The brigadier general assembled his forces in an omnidirectional formation so that he could immediately respond to any contingent events on the left flank, under the command of Major General Thaddeus, or the right, under Major General Travis. Neinhardt’s assignment to command the higher-ranked generals spoke to

Cornelius's confidence in him after he demonstrated his aptitude for seeing the bigger picture at the Battle of Ilys.

Cornelius himself planned to hang back with a small force of a thousand soldiers. That would give him a better grasp of the overall progression of the battle. Several of Fernest's Ten Swords were assigned to his defense, including Aurelian the Third Sword and Cattleya the Seventh Sword. Although they were both masterful warriors, not one person considered it sufficient protection for the field marshal—especially the supreme commander of their army. No one raised any objection, however. Cornelius's spirit burned so brightly that his officers hesitated to voice their doubts.

As Cornelius took to the battlefield, he transformed into the Invincible General of eld. He delivered his commands with a glint in his eyes that made his fellow warriors tremble.

On the other side of the plains, the Helios Knights arranged themselves in an echelon formation with units staggered diagonally. Each unit assumed a defensive high tower formation, great shields at the ready to meet the First Legion. Gladden planned to employ strong defenses to repel the First Legion's attacks while drawing them into a defense-in-depth strategy. Once behind the Helios Knights' front lines, the First Legion would become bogged down and lose momentum. Then, his forces would surround and exterminate them. He also took the Knights' specialized offensive heavy unit known as the Caelestis Wolves, divided them into eight battalions, and positioned them at key points around the battlefield. The Wolves were an elite unit only deployed at critical moments. They wielded partisans, polearms with a wide blade that could stab and slash, and charged their enemies with terrifying force in a formation known as Heaven's Wrath. That Gladden was deploying the Wolves from the outset in this battle showed just how far he would go to win.

The year was Tempus Fugit 999. Winter was drawing to a close. Under the limitless expanse of the azure sky, the two armies charged at each other, shouting fearlessly. In generations to come, the Battle of the Plains of Nobis would be known as a turning point in history. Now, it had begun.

General Headquarters of the Helios Knights

“They’ve gone for a very bold choice in positioning their troops the way they have,” Oscar remarked. Gladden looked out over the forces spread out before them and nodded.

“That’s the Invincible General for you,” he said. “As far as I can tell, their formation is seamless.” *And that’s what makes this tragic*, he thought to himself. *So much rides upon the lord one serves*. Compared to Ramza the Good, Fernest’s King Alfonse was building himself a reputation throughout the continent as a royal fool. It was all he deserved, of course, for bringing a proud kingdom that had continued for six hundred years so low. In the beginning, the idea of waging war upon the Kingdom of Lions had inspired an extraordinary fervor in Gladden that, when he looked back on it now, he could only think of with scorn.

“There’s no point in dwelling on what might have been, but if the First Legion had fought actively in the war from the beginning, I imagine we’d still be in a stalemate,” he mused. “Perhaps it was written in the stars. Fate hasn’t smiled on Fernest much at all.”

Oscar’s mouth curved up slightly. Gladden assumed the other man’s thoughts had followed a similar path to his own. Just then, another matter he’d been considering floated to the front of his mind.

“On another note, have you looked over Colonel Guyel’s report, Oscar?”

Oscar thought for a moment, then replied, “The so-called *Death God Journals*, ser?”

“That’s right. The *Death God Journals*.”

“I read them, of course...” Oscar said doubtfully. “But why the sudden interest?”

“Oh, nothing. I was just thinking that, by rights, Fernest ought to have long since met its end.”

Since the arrival of the girl they called Death God, a great many soldiers had met their end on the battlefield. Osvannes, Georg, Listenburg—all strong and seasoned warriors, and all no longer of this world. It was, of course, irrational to think that this Death God was directly responsible for all of them, but Gladden

couldn't shake the sense that the unification of Duvedirica was slipping further and further away from them since her arrival. Gladden was the highest ranking officer in the imperial army, and so thought nothing of the criticisms of incompetent fools. It didn't escape his notice, though, that all the bureaucrats who, away from the battlefield, would usually have been first in line to attack him had held their tongues. Their reticence was only because Chancellor Darmés, the empire's second most important man and head of the bureaucrats, had ceased interfering with him. He knew that. Military officers and bureaucrats had always gotten on like oil and water, and their leaders were no different. But that thought, if anything, only cast an unsettling light on Darmés's recent silence.

"It's no good getting hung up on the Death God right now," Oscar said. "We're fighting the First Legion and the Invincible General. We should focus on winning that battle first." It was a justified reproach, and Gladden nodded his wholehearted agreement.

"You're right. It's not only the Death God we can't afford to underestimate, but the Invincible General, as well. A single moment's lapse in judgment could be fatal."

Oscar nodded, but they could not rightly postpone the matter of the Death God entirely. He suggested that Gladden dispatch Felix to remove her from the field. The suggestion itself did not come unexpectedly—Gladden had been thinking along those lines himself. Now that Rosenmarie could not take the field, only Felix could kill Fernest's strongest soldier as the singular strongest man in the Imperial Army—her only counterpart.

Gladden had just considered giving the order for the Death God's removal after defeating the Second Legion when the surprise attack had hit Fort Astora. In the spirit of caution, he had sent Felix there. The attacker, it had emerged, was not the Seventh Legion, but an army of unknown origin. Gladden hadn't seen *that* one coming. On top of that, the army's commander had wielded the godlike power possessed only by the mages. While thanking the heavens that he had been cautious, Gladden also felt a chill in his marrow at the thought of what might have happened if Felix had arrived any later. After much consideration, he had decided that Felix would remain stationed at the fort. He

didn't expect another attack, but he couldn't rule out the Seventh Legion seizing the opportunity to go on the offensive. If they did march on the fort, Gladden was sure Felix was more than capable of handling them *and* the Death God to boot. It was imperative that he didn't lose here, lest still more fools emerged with delusions that they could challenge the empire.

"Enemy infantry emerging on the left flank!" a soldier shouted. Gladden picked up his commander's staff, his face grim.

The Right Flank of the First Legion

Half a day had passed since the fighting began. The right flank had advanced first and was met by the Helios Knights' strong defenses. Though they found themselves fighting against heavy odds, they were slowly pushing the enemy back. At a glance, it appeared that the Royal Army had the upper hand...

"This isn't going well..." muttered the white-haired, wiry Major General Travis. He wore a red cloak emblazoned with a two-headed silver eagle that marked him as a member of the House of Meyer. This family was one of the Six Flowers, the most celebrated warrior houses in Fernest.

Lieutenant Bram, his aide, paused in issuing orders to soldiers and turned to him with a dubious look on his face. Travis realized his voice must have carried farther than he'd thought.

"What isn't going well?" Bram asked.

"Everything. Even as we speak, we're getting closer to being surrounded and annihilated."

"Surrounded and annihilated?" Bram repeated in a tone of disbelief. Lowering his voice, he went on. "Excuse my impertinence, ser, but I only see our forces pushing the enemy back. I really have no idea what you're talking about..."

"So not even you see it, Lieutenant. The Helios Knights are a formidable opponent, indeed..."

The Helios Knights were fending off the First Legion's attacks and responding with an occasional counterattack of their own, all the while cleverly luring them deep behind enemy lines. Even Travis had only noticed it after detecting a few subtle warning signs. He doubted any of those fighting on the front lines,

commanding officers included, had noticed anything amiss. The reason Travis called the Helios Knights formidable was thus: they were successfully carrying out a performance that required exceptional coordination between divisions.

All right, what next? Travis thought, folding his arms. Even withdrawal didn't seem like a feasible option. As soon as the enemy commander knew the First Legion was on to the plan, he would, like as not, immediately tighten the noose around them. But if they fought on, all that waited for them in the end was eventual annihilation. There was only one option left: throw the Helios Knights off-balance from the *outside*, then wait for an opening to begin withdrawing their forces.

Which means I have no choice but to turn to him... Travis thought grumpily, then explained their predicament to the still incredulous Bram. Bram's expression slowly changed until he looked like he'd swallowed something unpleasant.

"But Lord Neinhardt is engaging the enemy now too, isn't he? Can he even send us reinforcements?"

"If he can't, we're finished," Travis said matter-of-factly. "We might as well just lie down on the Plains of Nobis and wait to die." When Bram looked aghast, he added, "But don't worry yourself. He might have everyone fooled with that pretty face of his, but Neinhardt's a crafty one. I reckon he could give Lieutenant General Blood of the Second Legion a run for his money. Not to mention," he went on, a hint of sarcasm in his tone, "his *illustrious* position as aide in the *elite* First Legion." With that, he told Bram to call a messenger.

The Central Force of the First Legion

The blazing sun was beginning to sink in the western sky and Neinhardt was engaged in a fierce battle with the Helios Knights when the messenger arrived bearing the banner of Major General Travis.

Neinhardt heard him out. "Lord Travis wants reinforcements?"

"Yes, ser. Right now, the enemy is threatening to surround us and wipe out our army. Their real plan was a defense-in-depth. The General begs you to make haste."

“What do you mean, surround you?” Katerina asked, looking through her spyglass at the right flank. Eventually, she turned back to them, puzzled. “It looks like we’re pushing them back.”

“Yes ser, I actually thought the same thing,” the messenger admitted. “But Lord Travis said that when I told Lord Neinhardt, he would understand.”

They both looked at Neinhardt. He told the messenger he would do as Travis requested, ordering Katerina to dispatch Major Dirk’s regiment, the fastest under his command.

After the messenger ran off looking confused, Katerina rounded on Neinhardt. “And are you going to explain what that was all about, ser?”

“The enemy made it look like they’d meet us with an echelon formation—that’s how I read it too—but in reality, they planned a trap. They’re trying to draw us in. Lord Travis, in other words, fell for it, hook, line, and sinker.”

“Did you know from the start?” Katerina said, her eyes accusing.

“No.”

“But you gave orders expressly forbidding our forces from venturing too far behind enemy lines.”

“From the start, something seemed off about the enemy’s movements for an echelon formation. I wanted to see what they’d do. This kind of situation rewards a bit of cowardice.”

Neinhardt also suspected that a difference in personality played a large role in why Travis had been ensnared. Travis tended to go on the offensive from the outset, while Neinhardt preferred to wait for his opponent to move and then counter accordingly. Travis was therefore at a disadvantage against an enemy looking to trap him. Neinhardt did have to credit the man’s perception in seeing through the enemy plan before the snare snapped shut.

“Very well. I understand that, ser, but we’re stretched thin here too. In all honesty, I don’t think we can afford to lose Major Dirk’s cavalry regiment.”

With the brunt of the Helios Knights’ force directed at the First Legion’s center, Katerina’s response was extremely rational. They could beat this

opponent with tactics alone. *Too late to do anything about it*, Neinhardt thought. Cornelius had shouldered him with one hell of a job.

“Even so, just knowing what the enemy is planning gives us an advantage. Katerina, tell all the commanding officers and send a messenger to Lord Thaddeus on the left flank.”

“Right away, ser!”

Afterward, with the arrival of Major Dirk’s reinforcements, Travis was able to withdraw his forces, though not without some casualties. He regrouped into a defensive formation and repelled the enemy’s pursuing attack.

Meanwhile, the left flank under Major General Thaddeus made it through with only scattered skirmishes. It wasn’t that he’d seen through the enemy’s plan; Thaddeus was by nature a painfully cautious man and on this occasion, it had worked to his advantage. When the Helios Knights’ machinations were exposed, his caution became even more pronounced. Anyone who advanced without leave, even when they brought news of success, was severely reprimanded. When the imperial commander lost patience and sent a reserve force against him, he at last ordered a retreat, demonstrating a strong defense on par with the Helios Knights.

Thus the first day of battle came to an end, with neither army able to snatch the advantage.

III

As the days passed, the fighting between the First Legion and the Helios Knights grew fiercer.

“New enemy units ahead and on both flanks!” cried a soldier as a mountainous enemy battalion came charging from three directions at once. Cornelius ordered a wedge formation held together by soldiers bearing great shields. The enemy force, rebuffed by the unflinching defense, was forced to split in two, heading straight toward where three ranks of archers lay in wait. The archers aimed their bows to the sky and, as one, pulled back their

bowstrings.

Cornelius kept calm. “Shoot them with ten volleys. Four, two, four.”

“The enemy is pushing back the front line with heavy infantry! They’re overpowering the right flank!”

“Send word to the fifth and sixth units of the Caelestis Wolves. Tell them to rip their guts out,” Gladden said with cold fury. The Wolves deployed on the western side of the plains moved out, demonstrating the full depth of their ferocity as they cleaved through the First Legion, leaving carnage in their wake.

Ten days passed. As neither army gave an inch of ground, the conflict began to descend into all-out war.

First Legion Command

The drop in temperature between day and night caused a dense fog to settle over the battlefield with each passing day. Neinhardt hurried to take his seat amongst the assembled officers, with Cornelius presiding. He had just received new information from a messenger.

“Any news of the enemy’s movements?” Cornelius asked.

“Yes, ser. What we believe is an elite unit is advancing under the cover of the fog. They number between four and five thousand. Based on their current trajectory, I think they’re planning on ambushing the left flank.”

Cornelius said nothing, stroking his white beard. He wore the russet-brown armor he’d favored since the warlord period. It was heavily battle-worn, harking back to his decorated career. At his waist hung his prized blade, Lemuria.

Long ago, Fernest had invaded the small empire of Lemuria in the south of Duvedirica. The youthful Cornelius had fought like a demon until, at last, he managed to take Imperial Prince Yuri prisoner. The prince commanded the entire Lemurian army, and Emperor Ludwig von Josef the Fourth was distraught by his capture. Of his four sons, Yuri was the most talented and the one he intended to make his heir. Josef offered a vast sum of gold for his son’s return, but King Rafael of Fernest had ignored his entreaties. What had at last changed the king’s mind was Lemuria’s ultimate treasure—a legendary sword said to cut

through lightning itself. Rafael had a penchant for collecting valuable weapons, so when heard the legends, he declared that he would return Yuri in exchange for the blade. Josef would have given anything to save his son's life. Adding the condition that Rafael would guarantee his sovereignty over his territory, he relinquished the sword. The war between Lemuria and Fernest tailed off after this until several years later the empire was destroyed by another invading nation. Alfonse, the current king, had no interest whatsoever in swords and so had bestowed it upon Cornelius, who carried the blade to this day.

All right. What will Lord Cornelius have to say? Neinhardt thought. He and the others all looked to Cornelius, waiting for him to speak.

After a long moment of contemplation, the old general said, "The Helios Knights have run out of patience at last. They have one of the Three Generals at their head, and he is undoubtedly an excellent commander..." He smiled sadly. "But he's still very young."

He immediately laid out their battle plan. They would deliberately allow the ambush to go ahead, then have soldiers lying in wait to spring an ambush of their own once the enemy broke through. After that, the line of soldiers that had pretended to break would form up once more to catch the enemy in a vise.

All of the officers nodded, with no one raising any objection. The messenger standing by was sent running to the left flank. Almost at once, another messenger took his place. There were two silver stars on his red epaulets, showing him to be from the Second Legion. A silent ripple of tension ran through the room.

"My lord, the Second Legion has defeated the enemy at the Freyberg Plateau," the messenger cried happily. "They are on their way to aid the First Legion as we speak."

The tension melted from the faces of the officers, and they let out a cheer. For most of them, Neinhardt included, the Second Legion's victory was an outcome they hadn't dared hope for; now, presented with the happy news, they felt a new upspring of motivation for the fight to come.

Cornelius exhaled deeply. "I see," he said quietly. "General Blood weathered the storm, then."

“Yes ser. Things looked bad at one point, but with Major Olivia’s reinforcements, we were able to turn the tide,” said the messenger.

Cornelius blinked a few times. “Ah, the girl the imperials call a Death God...” he said. “I’ve read every report, of course, but they all sounded too much like the stories my great-grandfather used to tell. What is she like, really?”

It was Neinhardt who answered. As he spoke, Olivia’s exquisite features appeared in his mind’s eye. “I think—no, I can say without a doubt that she is the strongest soldier in the Royal Army. In all honesty, there has never been another I’ve been so relieved to know is on our side.”

As if to back up his claims, the messenger began to excitedly recount Olivia’s actions. If what he said was true, there was no question that no one else even began to approach the magnitude of her achievements. As hard as that was to believe from her usual attitude. The word that flitted across the back of Neinhardt’s mind was “hero.”

“To hear even you speak so...” Cornelius said thoughtfully. “She must be a warrior of such caliber as appears but once in a century. Perhaps we in the Royal Army ought to see her not as a harbinger of death, but as a goddess.”

“I agree. She does look the part.” Neinhardt meant it as a throwaway remark, but Cornelius’s eyes went wide, and he stared intently at Neinhardt. Even the other officers were looking at him like they’d seen a ghost. “Did I say something odd?” he asked.

Cornelius, trying to cover his surprise, cleared his throat several times. “No, it’s just that I’ve never known you to compliment another’s appearance before,” he said quickly. “That aide of yours—what was her name again?”

“Second Lieutenant Katerina?”

“That’s right. Lieutenant Katerina. I don’t think she’d be happy to hear you making such remarks.”

Neinhardt frowned, not understanding. “Why would it make Lieutenant Katerina unhappy?”

For some reason, Cornelius looked at him with pity. The other officers all began to smirk.

“Ah, dear. Even you, with all your talents, are lacking in some areas. Even when the heavens give with both hands, they hold something back, it appears. That poor girl must have had quite the time of it.”

“Well, I won’t deny that I have her work hard...” Neinhardt admitted. Katerina was an excellent aide, one that Neinhardt relied on heavily. He was cognizant of how much work this made for her, but precisely because he made sure to be aware of it, he couldn’t work out what area Cornelius thought he was lacking in.

“That’s not quite what I meant...” Cornelius said. “But no matter. One day, if we get the chance, we shall discuss it more thoroughly. But here and now...” He rose slowly from his chair; then, with the eyes of the room on him, he carefully drew Lemuria from its scabbard. Neinhardt had never seen the blade before. There was a bluish gleam to the steel that seemed to chill to the air around it. According to the legends, this blade had cut through lightning itself. Indeed, Neinhardt felt a sense of menace in the sword that made him believe it could cut through anything.

Cornelius’s eyes flashed as he thrust Lemuria into the ground in front of him. “Now the lion will show the Helios Knights its fangs! We will show them the might of the First Legion!”

“Yes, ser!” As one, the officers in the room rose and saluted, their faces alive with the will to fight. Cornelius looked around them with satisfaction, his eyes coming to rest on Neinhardt.

“Neinhardt, keep in close contact with the Second Legion.”

“As you command, Lord Marshal,” Neinhardt said, putting his right hand to his heart in a knight’s salute. Cornelius returned the same gesture and solemnly inclined his head to him.

General Headquarters of the Helios Knights

“It seems we misjudged the First Legion,” Oscar said. “Though it may appear that neither side is making any headway in the battle, they’re gradually closing in on us.”

Gladden grimaced. He certainly hadn’t underestimated the First Legion; he had brought the full force of the Helios Knights to bear against them. As it

turned out, however, the First Legion was far beyond what he had expected. That, and by extension Cornelius's leadership, filled him with a chilling fear he couldn't put words to.

"Any word from the Caelestis Wolves we sent?"

"None, my lord." The officer who'd put forward the idea of an ambush under the cover of the fog reluctantly spoke up. "I can only assume we've lost them..."

Gladden beat his fist on the table in a rage. "Lost them? *Lost them?! You're* talking about five thousand Caelestis Wolves!" The assembled officers stared at him in dismay. Even when a soldier under his command made a mistake, Gladden rarely ever raised his voice. It was a common refrain of his that a commander was responsible for all the failures of his subordinates. He realized, with a rush of self-disgust, the extent to which this battle was weighing on his mind.

"Forgive me," he said at length. "That was shameful conduct for a man in my position."

"Not at all, my lord," said Oscar. "The First Legion has demonstrated capabilities far outstripping what our analysts predicted. Right now, all that matters is that we waste no time in making our next move."

At a glance from Oscar, an orderly came over to him with a cup of hausen tea. Gladden accepted it, silently grateful for Oscar's delicacy in handling these matters as he took a sip. He breathed in the rich aroma as warmth spread through his body.

"Oscar is right," he said, feeling himself regain some semblance of calm. "Does anyone have another plan?" He looked around his assembled officers who, as though they'd choreographed it in advance, all looked away from Oscar and down at the ground. Usually, they'd have launched into a lively exchange of ideas. Gladden's outburst was probably one of the reasons for their reticence, but there was more to it.

They're too used to winning, he realized. Now, even a single defeat terrifies them. And they're supposed to command the Helios Knights! There's a harrowing thought. I'll have to do something about this later. He heaved a deep and deliberate sigh.

Just then, noises of commotion broke out outside the tent. They all looked to the entrance and saw a mud-splattered messenger, supported by a soldier on either side.

“Someone get him some water,” Gladden barked, and the officer closest to the entrance held out his canteen.

The messenger downed every drop, water spilling out over his face, then, regularity slowly returning to his ragged breathing, he knelt and said, “My lords. Lieutenant General Patrick is dead. His army was destroyed.”

In the silence that followed, a pin drop would’ve sounded clear as a bell. Everyone present, even Gladden, gaped at the messenger, unable to process what they’d just heard. It was the only rational response. In the most recent reports, they’d been told only that Patrick’s forces had the Second Legion backed into a corner.

“What are you saying?” Gladden demanded, finding his tongue once more. “In the reports I heard, the Second Legion were on their last legs on the Freyberg Plateau. Not three days have passed since then.” A horrible thought struck him. “Patrick wasn’t feeding us lies, was he?” As soon as he said it, though, he knew it couldn’t be true. Patrick was as frank and open as they came. Lies and subterfuge were not in his nature. He had even regarded Gladden’s reconnaissance units unfavorably.

Just so, the messenger shook his head, looking miserable. “No, Lord Marshal. General Patrick told no lies. Just as you said, he’d pushed the Second Legion to the brink of collapse.”

“Then how is he dead?”

“Because Death God Olivia joined the battle. It was by her merciless blade that both General Patrick and General Kristoff met their ends.” At this revelation, the officers exploded in an uproar.

“Death God Olivia?! What’s she doing on the central front?!” Gladden demanded.

At this obvious question, the messenger only shook his head hopelessly. “I don’t know, my lord. All I can say for sure is that it won’t be long before she

arrives here.”

Gladden was speechless. If he took the messenger at his word, that meant the Helios Knights were in danger of being caught between two armies. As if that weren't bad enough, one of them included Death God Olivia. In an instant, Gladden realized that, with the First Legion proving a stronger adversary than he'd predicted, a misstep here could lead to total ruination.

“Lord Marshal, if we have to fight the Death God as well...”

“I know,” Gladden snapped. “We have no choice but to retreat to Kier Fortress.” Everyone present nodded at once. Just as he began to consider whom to assign the most difficult post commanding the rear guard, Alexander volunteered himself, his eyes full of unusual confidence.

“Very well,” Gladden said at length. “Alexander, you will have five thousand soldiers. Show them what you're made of.”

“Yes, ser!” Alexander replied. All of them rushed from the tent to get preparations for the retreat underway. Only Oscar remained. His eyes followed Alexander as the boy left, then he turned to Gladden.

“Are you sure about that?” he murmured. “I wonder if this might not be too heavy a burden for Colonel Alexander to bear.”

“I've warned him not to underestimate his enemy, and I never give the same warning twice. Whether he lives or dies from here on out is up to him.” Gladden sighed. “He will die though, I imagine.”

“Well, in that case,” Oscar said, and the two exchanged a nod of understanding.

Leaving Alexander and the rear guard behind, they began the march back to Kier Fortress.

IV

“Colonel Alexander!” cried his aide, Captain Sascha, as he ran ahead. “This way! hurry!”

They had left the Plains of Nobis behind them. At his aide's urging, Alexander

pushed his way into the depths of the forest. Including Sascha, he only had five soldiers with him. They had already discarded their armor, as it was too heavy to run in. Branches clawed at Alexander's face, but he paid them no mind, focusing only on running. Between ragged breaths, he cursed to himself. "This can't be..." he gasped. "This can't be happening...!"

Alexander had volunteered for the rear guard because he'd seen a chance to demonstrate his talent. He hadn't doubted for a moment that he, the youngest soldier to ever be made lieutenant, could carry out the dangerous assignment with magnificent success.

Not two hours had passed since they came into contact with the Second Legion when Alexander's forces broke.

It wasn't a problem of ability, Alexander told himself as he ran. Luck just wasn't on my side this time. If Marshal Gladden is still alive at the end of this, a promotion to colonel is all but mine. Brigadier general, if I'm lucky.

He realized then that he could no longer hear the breathing of his soldiers running behind him. Confused, he stopped and turned around. There was no sign of the other four.

Suddenly, there came a voice. "Colonel Alexander, please stay behind me." Alexander spun around and saw Sascha in front of him, his sword drawn. He took a few steps back, and that was when he saw her: a girl in ebony armor, weaving her way through the trees toward them. In her hand, she held a sword of the same color that trailed black mist.

"Ebony armor... An ebony blade..." he breathed. "You're Death God Olivia!"

"Yep. I mean, I'm not a Death God, but close enough," she said. "Can we wrap up the game of tag now?"

"Kyaaaggghhh!" Sascha let out a shriek like a monstrous bird and threw himself at Olivia. She lowered her weight a fraction, then slashed up in a diagonal. Blood splattered the trees as Sascha's torso went flying. It caught on a branch and, from above them, his guts began to fall to the ground with soft *plops*.

"Next—"

“W-Wait! I surrender! Just don’t kill me!” Alexander took the sword from his belt and flung it away. Only a madman could have seen what he just had and still think of trying to fight.

Olivia rested the ebony blade on her shoulder and tilted her head doubtfully. “Really? I heard the Helios Knights never surrendered, just like the Crimson Knights.”

“I don’t know who told you that, but only a fool chooses death,” Alexander replied.

Olivia nodded in agreement. “I think so too. I don’t get why everyone’s so keen to die, you know? Death means no more books and no more delicious food.” Returning her sword to its scabbard, she said, “All right, follow me then.” She set off with a spring in her step, humming under her breath. She appeared to have let her guard down completely.

Alexander could hardly contain his excitement. *She’s a terrifying force with a blade, no doubt, but underneath that, it turns out she’s just an idiot girl. General Patrick and General Kristoff really got themselves killed by this airhead? What a joke. Fighting is about more than just playing fair. So long as you win in the end, it doesn’t matter what cowardly tricks you have to resort to.*

Killing the Death God would bring more than mere prestige—he’d be in line for an Imperial Cross, and a promotion to major general would be all but guaranteed. Suppressing a smirk, Alexander slowly drew closer to Olivia’s back. Just as he’d thought, she wasn’t paying him any attention. No longer bothering to conceal his glee, he whipped out the dagger he kept hidden in his right sleeve and thrust it at the nape of Olivia’s neck. *Die!!!* he thought.

His vision flickered. “What?” he said stupidly. Olivia was not dead on the ground as he’d expected, but standing in front of him, her cheeks puffed out in annoyance. There was something in her hand, an object about the size of his fist that squirmed and pulsed.

That’s not... he thought slowly. *That can’t be a heart?* A horrible thought gripped him and, terrified of what he was about to see, he looked down at his chest. From a tear in his shirt, a circle of red was spreading.

“Oh...” he breathed.

“You mustn’t lie!” Olivia scolded him. “If you lie, a demon will come and tear your tongue out!” There was a squelch as she crushed the heart in her fist, and with that, Alexander breathed his last.

The Battle of the Plains of Nobis came to an end on the twelfth day since the fighting began, with the Royal Army securing a crucial victory on the central front.

Unbeknownst to both armies, however, someone else had been watching the conflict with great interest...

Chapter Five: Ballroom Hostilities

I

The Training Ground at the Gate to the Land of the Dead

“Z, what are we practicing today?” asked the girl.

Today I will be observing you to judge how your ability to use magic has progressed. Leave your sword where you are, you will not need it.

“Okay.” With a nod, the girl propped her white sword up against a nearby stump.

Let us begin. First, you will attack me with the strongest magic you can muster. I will not make any kind of attack against you.

The girl made a disbelieving noise. “Last time you said that, you attacked me, though,” she objected, pouting. Z looked at her in exasperation. Of course, as Z didn’t have a face, that was only her impression.

That was to teach you caution. There are some out there who would resort to subterfuge to ensnare an opponent. Fighting is about more than merely how far you can push your body, and you have a bad habit of not accepting what I tell you.

The girl laughed awkwardly, fiddling with her hair to avoid answering.

If I have made myself clear, then let us begin, Z said. It will not do to waste time when human lives are so short.

“I’m ready!” The girl screwed up her face in concentration as she bound together the mana inside her. It was just like kneading clay. As she did so, she also began to draw to her the magical essence that permeated the air. Finally, a mass of glowing, blue-white specks began to gather around her hands, coalescing into two fist-sized balls of light.

The girl planted her feet shoulder-width apart, lowered into her stance, and

then pulled her hands close to her sides. Just as Z had promised, it showed no sign of responding. It stood there, straight as a board, with only the black mist continuing, as usual, to coil around its form.

“Ready or not, here I come!” the girl called. Her left hand shot out, sending a ball of light hurtling toward Z, who only waited impassively. The ball of light made a direct hit with a thunderous *BANG*, kicking up a huge cloud of dust. The girl didn’t pause; she was already throwing the second ball of light. When it met its target, there was an even louder explosion that made the earth around them tremble.

I bet Z wasn’t expecting that! she thought, smiling to herself. *Z doesn’t know I’ve been practicing by myself.* As she looked on, Z’s voice seemed to weave its way out of the dust cloud to her.

Was that it?

“I’m not done!” the girl shouted. She began to send balls of fire shooting up into the sky until they covered the heavens above them like a blazing sunset. Then, she wove the air together into a rope of wind. It streaked from her hand like a whip, binding Z from head to foot. The more you struggled against this rope, the more it cut into your flesh, and it was sharp enough to slice through bone.

Z made an approving noise. *You have certainly improved*, it murmured, looking at the rope as though it were an interesting curiosity.

The girl swung her hand down, and the fireballs all rushed down toward Z. The god of death was engulfed in bright crimson fire. By the time the final fireball reached its mark, it had grown into a roiling pillar of flame that emitted a deafening roar.

“How...How’s that then?” the girl said, anxiously watching as the pillar continued to burn. Then, there was a sudden, blinding flash of light, and the next moment, the pillar was gone as though it had never been. Z wasn’t even singed, despite being engulfed in an inferno. The girl saw it approach her as though nothing had happened, and threw herself down on the ground in defeat. She couldn’t do anything more.

Are you done?

“Y...Yeah.”

I see... Z said. Well, not bad. Its voice betrayed no emotion, but the girl beamed. She knew that where Z was concerned, “not bad” meant she’d done a good job.

“By the way, Z,” she asked, “are there other humans apart from me who can use magic?”

Z looked at her briefly, then said tonelessly, *No.*

“Huh, okay...” The girl fell silent for a moment, then asked, “Hey, why are you teaching me magic, anyway?”

The girl was already thirteen years old, and she understood that magic was far too great a power to be trifled with. Just the previous day, she’d tried to catch a vampire bird with magic, only to summon too much power and reduce the creature to ash. The memory stung.

Do you not like magic? Z asked.

“That’s not what I meant. It just seems pretty dangerous.”

So long as you understand that, I am satisfied. Humans, in their pride, are wont to lust after power. Z paused, then added, *Truly, humans grow at a remarkable pace.* It nodded with an air of something like wonder, then fell silent. The girl sat, watching until Z noticed her gaze and said, *You were asking why I teach you magic, I believe.*

“Yeah.”

For now, let us just say that, though they are few in number, there are those in this world who pass off cheap tricks under the name of “magic.” That is why.

“Cheap tricks?” the girl asked, puzzled.

It is not something you need to concern yourself with at present, Z replied.

“Okay.”

And one more thing. You must get your gluttony under control. With that, Z vanished, signaling that the conversation was over. Apparently, Z knew all about her excursion the previous day.

The girl lay down spread-eagled on the ground once more, feeling herself slowly sinking back into the embrace of a deep slumber.

II

Elsphere, capital of the Holy Land of Mekia

The sunlight grew warmer with the passing of the days, until at last the snows that had blanketed Elsphere in a sheet of white began to melt. Around this time of year, the birds that had wintered at Lake Carla on the outskirts of the holy city took to the wing, leaving its sparkling sapphire waters to return north. The city folk saw them go and knew that spring was close at hand.

At the very top of La Chaim Palace, there was a stately room called the Chamber of Rippling Light. There sat Lara, Amelia, and all the other officers of the rank of thousand-wing or higher, presided over by Seraph Sofitia, all gathered at a round table. Senior Hundred-Wing Zephyr, a man in a gray cloak with a false eye, was also amongst them. He controlled the owls, Mekia's intelligence agents.

"—and that is the full account of what happened," he concluded, placing his report down with a small sigh.

"Thank you for your observations, Zephyr. Despite his old age, the Invincible General is tough as ever, then?"

"Yes, my Seraph. The leadership he showed in this battle did honor to that name."

"Which makes it all the more obvious how foolish Alfonse was to keep him back defending their capital. In these troubled times, a king whose only skill is counting coins is worse than useless."

Alfonse's treatises on public finance suggested that he might have been remembered as a wise ruler if he had reigned over an era of peace. Ultimately, he was poorly matched to the age he'd been born into. *What a pity.*

"I agree completely, my Seraph." Zephyr nodded deferentially, as did Lara.

"Well, for now, let us be happy for the Royal Army in their victory, and give

thanks to the Goddess Strecia for hearing our prayers.” Sofitia brought both hands to her breast in solemn prayer. Everyone else did the same.

Even the empire can't help but be shaken by this, she thought. Now that the Helios Knights had followed the Crimson Knights in defeat, they couldn't ignore the possibility that some of the countries they'd subjugated might rebel. Certainly not after this string of repeated mistakes. The Imperial Army would have to withdraw from the front lines and put all its efforts into tracking how those other nations responded. The thought filled Sofitia with satisfaction. The Goddess Strecia had bestowed her grace upon the Holy Land of Mekia.

When the prayer was over, Lara asked, “My Seraph. What is our strategy going forward?”

All eyes turned to Sofitia. “Our strategy, yes...” Sofitia looked back at the report in her hands and a stillness fell over the Chamber of Rippling Light.

At last, Zephyr broke the silence. “I believe you are preoccupied with the girl they call Death God—this Olivia Valedstorm. Is it not so?” The orb of smoky quartz embedded in his left eye socket gleamed unsettlingly.

Sofitia gave him a twisted smile. “I can't hide anything from you, Zephyr. Yes, it seems I gravely underestimated our dear Death God.”

The Helios Knights had driven the Second Legion to the brink of utter annihilation, just as Sofitia and Lara had predicted. Then, in defiance of all reason, a single young girl had turned the tide of the battle. The First Legion's dominance over the Helios Knights had also far surpassed their initial predictions, but that development paled in comparison to the Death God's impact.

I only wanted to get what advantage I could while they tore each other apart, Sofitia thought ruefully. *But I can't continue to make that excuse anymore.*

The battle had been all but decided until this one girl arrived to turn the tide. Sofitia could think of no one she'd rather have as an ally, but it would be a problem if this girl became their enemy. One didn't have to be the seraph to imagine the damage she could do to Mekia. Sofitia had previously thought to leave the Death God be, but she had the feeling that for what came next, they would need more accurate information.

“In my position, I have seen many great warriors,” Zephyr said, “but this girl is a different species entirely. Death hangs over her like a mantle. Every swing of her blade is like something out of a nightmare. Watching her fight, I honestly struggled to believe she was human. This has never happened to me before. It shames me to admit it, but it made me tremble.”

Lara immediately opened her mouth to respond, but Sofitia silenced her with a flick of her hand. “Zephyr, are you trying to impress upon me the danger of interfering with the Death God?”

Zephyr slowly shook his head. “That is not my intention, my Seraph. If you wish to gather information, you can count on the owls to see it done. We will bring you everything, down to her pastimes and favorite foods. However, unlike the empire’s shimmers, we are not fighters. To my great shame,” he added regretfully. But Sofitia wasn’t troubled on that count. The owls far outshone the shimmers when it came to reconnaissance.

“Let me see if I understand you, then,” she said. “If we want to learn more about what this Death God can do, we should send someone who can match her. Is that right?”

“Your perspicacity is unmatched, my Seraph,” Zephyr replied, bowing.

As he did so, Amelia spoke up where she sat across from him. “My Seraph, please consider me for this assignment. As a mage, I am ideally suited to assessing her powers.”

“Don’t be a fool!” Lara snapped, her eyes flashing. “Scarcely any time has passed since you returned from your last mission. You’ll wait your turn.”

Sofitia didn’t disagree that Amelia, who primarily favored binding magecraft, would be well-suited to the task at hand. Rather than admit that out loud, she instead turned to Amelia. “I appreciate your enthusiasm, Amelia,” she said, “but you are still recovering from your wounds inflicted by Lord Sieger, are you not?”

“That isn’t... I...” Amelia quickly hid her bandaged hand beneath the round table. The handsome young man sitting next to her watched her with a smile.

“We mages are so few in number,” said Senior Thousand-Wing Johann Strider. “We cannot afford to lose even one if the Holy Land of Mekia is to reign

supreme over Duvedirica. I understand your eagerness, dear Amelia, but doing all you can to maintain your health is as much part of your duties as anything else.” He turned to Sofitia. “Would you not agree, my Seraph?”

Sofitia laughed softly. “You took the words out of my mouth, Johann,” she said with a smile. Amelia glared resentfully at Johann, but this only made him chuckle.

“That brings me to my point,” he continued. “I will go and see what I can ferret out about this Death God and her powers.”

“You, Johann?”

“Yes, my Seraph. Her beauty is reportedly divine. I want to look upon that countenance with my own eyes,” he said lightly, as though he were suggesting a turn around the garden. He brushed his flaxen hair—a rarity in Mekia—back with his left hand, where his scarlet mage circle glittered. Despite the levity of his manner, Johann was a first-class swordsman and mage, possessed of a cool and calculating intellect to boot. He was, in many ways, the perfect choice for this mission.

“Understandable...” Sofitia said thoughtfully. “Very well. You may go, but remember that we have no idea the extent of the Death God’s true powers. We know of her formidable prowess with a blade, but I fear there is more to her than that.”

“More, my Seraph?” Johann frowned. “Do you think she’s hiding something?”

“I do. So if you sense danger, you are to withdraw at once.”

Sofitia herself had no clear idea of what this “something” might be, but she knew that, despite their superhuman powers, the mages were not invincible. Felix was not a mage, but he had just defeated Amelia. Of course, he was hailed as the greatest warrior the empire could bring to bear, so perhaps the comparison was unfair.

“Is that based on your intuition as seraph?”

“Perhaps it would be more accurate to call it my intuition as a woman.”

“A woman’s intuition? A terrible thing, that. It’s gotten me into some truly

wretched predicaments,” Johann said, folding his arms and looking solemn. His reputation for seducing women, from noble ladies to scullery maids, was well known. Amelia shot him a look of icy contempt as Sofitia smiled.

“Forgive my insistence, but you must return at the first sign of danger,” she said. “That is an unconditional order.”

“I understand. I wouldn’t want to contradict my earlier words to dear Amelia.”

“Just a moment.” Lara, who had been silent through most of the conversation, now interjected. She was glaring at Johann. “If anyone is to go and take the measure of the Death God, it should be me, not Johann.”

Johann replied before Sofitia could formulate a response, with the tone of explaining something obvious. “Blessed Wing Lara, you are the commander-in-chief of the Winged Crusaders,” he said. “We aren’t at war. There’s no reason for someone of your rank to go after one person.”

“This isn’t just anyone, this is the *Death God*. We have no idea how powerful she is. It’s only common sense to send the strongest warrior after her.”

“Be that as it may, while judging the Death God’s abilities is within my capabilities, leading the Winged Crusaders is not. You ought to consider your position more carefully.”

Lara’s beautiful features twisted at Johann’s reprimand, but he’d made his point. She didn’t say any more.

“Johann is right, Lara,” Sofitia said. “You are not just the commander-in-chief of our army, but our secret weapon. Try not to forget that.”

Lara, flushing red with shame, bowed her head. “Forgive me, my Seraph. I was careless.”

“So long as you understand. Lara, you are not only my sword and my shield, but also my friend. You are irreplaceable to me.” Sofitia smiled at her.

“I am not worthy of such words.” Lara rose from her chair, then knelt, tears glistening in her eyes. “I, Lara Mira Crystal, will not forget your advice today. My allegiance is, now and forever, to my Seraph.”

Sofitia had to admire the strength of her loyalty. “Lara, please be seated,” she said, then turned to Johann. “I beg you not to do anything rash. Zephyr will be there to give you the support you need.”

Johann replied by raising two fingers in a salute, while Zephyr bowed low. Sofitia stood up, then raised her staff over their heads. Its metal rings clinked softly as she prayed, “May the blessings of Strecia go with you both.”



III

Leticia Castle, the Royal Capital of Fis

Two weeks had passed since the Helios Knights had escaped the First Legion's pursuit and retreated to Kier Fortress.

Leaving behind the Second Legion with a newly strengthened line of defense, Olivia and the First Legion rode back to Fis, where they were met with a hero's welcome. So wild was the citizens' enthusiasm that it took far longer than it should have for them to reach Leticia Castle. After being bombarded so, the moment Olivia reached the room assigned to her by Neinhardt, she threw herself into bed.

This is so soft and comfy, she thought as she buried her face in the pillow. And it smells like sunshine. I'm so worn out after today. A nap sounds nice...

No sooner had she thought this than there came a knock at the door. Olivia gave leave to enter and Claudia let herself in. She wore an enormous grin, which put Olivia on her guard. In her experience, Claudia rarely had anything good to say when she smiled like that.

"Isn't it a glorious, sunny day, Major?" Claudia said cheerfully.

Olivia looked out the window at the gloomy, gray sky. "It's cloudy outside..."

"The sun is shining in my heart!" Claudia smiled brightly at her, sending Olivia's sense of danger skyrocketing.

"Do you need something?" Olivia asked. "I'd prefer to deal with it later if it's not urgent. The thing is, I was actually thinking about taking a nap."

Thinking that if she were asleep, she wouldn't have to deal with annoying conversations, Olivia started snuggling under the covers. But Claudia's hands clamped around her legs and dragged her back out. Olivia, not to be discouraged, attempted to get back under the covers while Claudia tried to thwart her. They struggled for a while until at last and with terrific effort, Claudia tore the blanket off of her.

Panting, she ran her fingers through her disheveled hair. "Would you cut it

out?!”

“*You* cut it out.”

There was a pause. “Did I hear you say something?”

“Nope, I didn’t say anything!” Olivia shook her head and assumed an innocent expression. Nothing good ever came of defying Claudia. The right thing to do here was to pretend nothing had happened.

“Unbelievable...” Claudia sighed. “There’s no time for sleeping now. I come bearing the very best of news for you.”

That sounded to Olivia like the very *worst* of news. She didn’t have pleasant memories of any of the times Claudia brought her “good” news, not a single one. Back at the conferment ceremony, Claudia had gotten a dress uniform altered for Olivia. When the ceremony was over Olivia had tried to return the uniform, but for some reason, Claudia had only laughed bitterly. “I can’t wear that anymore,” she’d said. “Keep it, ser. As a gift.”

In her room at Leticia Castle, she reluctantly said, “Okay, I guess I’ll hear it.”

With a smug chuckle, Claudia said, “Try to maintain your composure, ser. None other than His Majesty, King Alfonse, has heard of your exploits and wishes to meet you. This is a great honor.” Claudia glowed with happiness as if she’d received the honor herself. She actually looked like she might start dancing. Olivia thought she might glow with happiness herself if only Claudia would now turn around and leave.

She coughed a few times. “Claudia, I think I have a cold. I’m really sorry, but I don’t want the king to catch it. I can’t—”

“Very well. Nothing but thin gruel until you recover.” Claudia loomed over her, her smile replaced by an icy glare. Just the thought of nothing but thin gruel was so bloodcurdling that Olivia thought she might *actually* get ill.

“—can’t *not* accept, of *course* I accept. I don’t even have a cold. I think I was imagining things.” She gave a false cheery laugh and flexed her biceps.

“That’s a relief.” Claudia was smiling again. She sat down next to Olivia and began laying out the schedule for the royal audience.

Ugh, if I'd known this was coming, I'd have run the moment I saw Claudia's smile, Olivia thought. *Nothing's going my way today.*

But there was no use crying over spilled milk. Just as she'd feared, Claudia had nothing good to say to her. And Claudia was as infatuated as ever with this incomprehensible, so-called "honor" thing.

I don't get it at all. You can't even eat it... Olivia wasn't interested in an audience with the king—she really couldn't care less. But she couldn't say that out loud or she knew Claudia would turn into a yaksha again, and that thought terrified her. She'd never say it, no matter what. Even so, she had to at least communicate to Claudia that she didn't have the faintest interest in honor.

"Claudia, I told you time before last, but I don't want honor, I'd rather have —"

"Books or delicious food, right?" Claudia smirked as Olivia, thrown by the unexpected response, nodded. With an air of triumph, she cleared her throat and said, "After the audience with King Alfonse, there will be a banquet to celebrate our victory. There won't be any books, of course, but I am told the food will be spectacular."

"Spectacular food?" This was so alluring to Olivia that she unconsciously drew closer to Claudia.

"They say the king's personal cooks—they're known as chefs royale—have His Majesty's permission to prepare some special dishes."

"Chefs royale..." Olivia repeated. "Oh! Like the man who traveled around making the world a better place while cooking amazing feasts!"

"Traveled the world? What?" Claudia looked bewildered, so Olivia told her all about *The Vagabond Chef Royale and His Journey of Reformation*, a story she'd read as a child. Long, long ago, there was a chef royale who grew so troubled by the persecution of the weak that he abandoned his country and set off on a journey. With two knives on his belt, he punished wrongdoers and cooked feasts for the common folk.

Olivia, inspired by this, had gone through a phase of cooking with two swords on her belt instead of knives. Z happened to come across her doing this once,

and she'd seen it cocking its head in confusion out of the corner of her eye.

"Major, the chefs royale do not punish wrongdoers, nor do they put on feasts for the commoners. They hardly ever leave the palace, let alone go on journeys to make the world a better place," Claudia said.

"You mean you don't think the Vagabond Chef Royale is real? But he *is*, he really is. At the end of the book, it said it was a true story." Olivia pouted, sticking her lips out like the beak of a vampire bird.

Claudia looked conflicted but at last, she steeled herself and said, "I don't want to trample on your dreams, ser..." A faraway look came over Claudia's face as she continued. "But I'm afraid the author probably wrote that as a joke. You know all about how Comet the Fairy liked to play jokes. This other book was fiction, just like Comet."

Olivia's shoulders slumped. Yet again, she'd learned something she didn't want to know.

The Audience Chamber at Leticia Castle

The king still isn't here? I just want to get this over with...

Olivia was led to the audience chamber, where she was now waiting for Alfonse and trying as hard as she could to suppress yawn after yawn. She was so bored that she'd started singing to herself inside her head when she heard the door in the back of the chamber open. Olivia heard multiple sets of footsteps, then sensed a single human sit down on the throne. Thanks to Claudia's strict instructions that she was not to look up until the king addressed her, she was getting very well acquainted with the floor.

"Rise, Olivia Valedstorm."

Finally, Olivia thought with relief as she looked up. Her next thought was, *Is that the king?*

The figure before her was the total opposite of the kings in her picture books. He had a thin and pallid face, his expression twisted in wide-eyed astonishment. The only thing he had in common with the kings from the picture books were his opulent robes and glittering crown.

Alfonse stared hard at Olivia for a while, then turned to Cornelius, who stood beside him and whispered something in his ear. Cornelius's only reply was to nod. Alfonse's doubtful gaze returned to Olivia. "You are Olivia Valedstorm, the Death God feared by the empire? There's no mistake?"

Cornelius opened his mouth, but Alfonse raised a hand to silence him.

"Yes, I'm Olivia Valedstorm." Olivia was confused. As far as she knew there was no one else with the same name as her. After all, the House of Valedstorm had only just been revived after over a hundred years. If there *was* someone out there with the same name as her, she wished they'd get here already and take her place.

"I have heard of how you brought down many of the empire's renowned generals. Do you remember their names?"

Olivia hesitated for a second before replying to Alfonse's second question. "That's a difficult question."

At once, Alfonse's expression became severe. "You don't remember? Common soldiers are one thing, but one would usually remember a general of renown, would you not agree? Are you *really* Olivia Valedstorm?"

Faced with the king's suspicion, Olivia replied with a question of her own. "Do you remember everything you eat every day, Your Majesty?"

"What I eat every day? Of course not. Why would I remember every meal?" he said arrogantly, snorting at the trivial question.

"It's the same for me. I don't remember every person I've killed. I don't see any difference between renowned generals and ordinary soldiers. They're all equal to me, all just humans."

That wasn't the whole truth. She remembered enemies who left an impression on her, whether she killed them or not. Blum, who'd given her the mini ballista, was one such example. This was difficult to explain, however, so she left it out.

Alfonse stared at her in amazement. Meanwhile, outraged voices started to rise up from his personal guards who lined the walls.

“Your Majesty,” Cornelius interjected, “I can confirm that this is Olivia Valedstorm, as much as I appreciate that, given her appearance, that may be difficult to believe.” As he looked over at her, Olivia gave him a little wave and his mouth twitched ever so slightly.

To combat her boredom on the road back to Fis, Olivia had evaded Claudia’s attempts to stop her and struck up a conversation with Cornelius. She’d heard he was the highest commander in the Royal Army, and that roused her curiosity a little. Cornelius had turned out to be a good-natured old man, and after their many conversations, they were thick as thieves. Claudia had stared at the ground every time they spoke, though.

“I have no talent for warfare,” Alfonse said at length. “I only ask these prying questions because of that. But hearing you now, I see at least that you are no ordinary girl.” He paused for a brief moment, before raising his voice in proclamation. “Olivia Valedstorm. You have distinguished yourself on the field of battle. If you have any desire, speak it now. There are limits to what I may grant you, but if it is within my power, I shall see it done.”

Alfonse’s offer was sudden, but Olivia didn’t miss a beat. “In that case, I’d like an enormous cake, like one you’d see in a picture book,” she said. “I always wanted to try one.”

“A cake? Did you just say *cake*?”

“I did.”

“That’s all you want? Not gold or jewels?”

“Yes, Your Majesty. I still don’t really get how money works, and I do think jewels are very pretty with how they sparkle. But apart from that, they don’t interest me.”

She laughed, and Alfonse gave her a crooked smile. “The old—that is, Cornelius told me you weren’t greedy, but...” He trailed off, then said, “It shall be so. For the banquet, I shall order the chefs to prepare a cake greater than that of any picture book.”

“Awesome! Um, I mean, thank you, Your Majesty.”

Alfonse hummed his acknowledgment. “That concludes our audience.”

Olivia jumped to her feet and saluted, then left the chamber with a spring in her step. *Here I was dreading this audience, she thought. Who'd have thought something so wonderful could come out of it?*

IV

The white walls of Leticia Castle glowed enchantingly as the light of the moon reached them. In the great hall, the banquet for the Royal Army's victory was underway, the space packed with officers, influential nobles, and other guests. When Olivia stepped into their midst, all eyes turned to her. She wore a stunning scarlet gown and her silver hair had been coiled and done up. Her only other adornments were a hair ornament patterned with red leaves and a dash of rouge on her lips. This was enough, however—even Claudia, who saw her every day, was rendered speechless by her beauty.

Voices floated over from the crowd. "How sublime. Like an image of the Goddess Strecia."

"*That's* the Death God who's been terrorizing the Imperial Army? You can't be serious."

"If only I were a little younger... I wonder if she'd marry my son instead."

Several of the men standing nearby were so captivated by her that they dropped their goblets, their drinks spilling all over the floor. To everyone's astonishment, some even heard the daughter of the eminent and renowned House of Haksburg admit "how fearfully beautiful she is," as she stared in dismay at Olivia.

While the guests stood captivated by her for all their myriad reasons, Olivia's eyes found the immense and unmissable confection that took pride of place on the banquet table. Her jaw dropped open.

"C-Claudia!" She grabbed the other girl's shoulder and shook her. "I don't believe it! It's like a tower! A cake like a tower! I've never seen anything like it, even in a picture book!"

The other recent arrivals were just as dumbfounded by the towering cake. Claudia had heard about Olivia's audience with the king, but it seemed he had

far exceeded her expectations.

Well, it was a promise from the king himself. Of course he wouldn't do it halfway... Claudia thought. *Still, this seems like a bit much.*

The chefs royale must have pulled out all the stops to create it. Claudia had never seen such an enormous cake. *I can understand Olivia's excitement*, she thought, staring up at the cake with a mix of exasperation and amazement.

Just then, there was a voice from behind them. "Judging by your demeanor, it measures up to your standards, Major Olivia."

"Oh, Lord Cornelius! Your beard's looking bushy as usual," Olivia said, burying her hands in it. For a moment, Claudia was so shocked that all she thought was how soft it looked. Cornelius, for his part, didn't reprimand Olivia. On the contrary, he surrendered a smile to her. Coming to, Claudia hurriedly grabbed Olivia by the shoulders and yanked her back.

"Major! It's rude to stroke the lord marshal's beard like that!"

Olivia looked at her, puzzled. "How can I do it politely then?"

"That is *not* what I mean! This is the lord marshal! You should address him with the proper degree of respect!"

"I don't mind," Cornelius chimed in. "Tonight is a banquet. You ought to relax and enjoy yourself as well, Lieutenant Claudia."

"Yes, ser! I am grateful for your consideration!" She instinctively went to salute, then quickly corrected herself, lightly plucking at her gown to curtsy. When she was in a dress, she had to comport herself like a lady. Claudia's own gown was midnight blue, with a bold pattern of stunning embroidered flowers that stretched from her waist right down to the hem. She was very proud of it, though putting it on today for the first time in a long while, she found it ever so slightly constricting around her middle.

I'm not getting fat, she told herself. *I've just put on more muscle.*

Meanwhile, Cornelius turned to Olivia, who was staring up at the cake. "This cake is for you, Major. You needn't restrain yourself—enjoy it."

Olivia laughed a little sheepishly, then patted her stomach. “I’ll eat as much as I can fit in!”

Cornelius gave her a kindly pat on the head, then walked slowly away. Several nobles stood waiting for him, smiles plastered on their faces. Now that the Invincible General had proved he was as vigorous as ever, they probably hoped to win his acquaintance.

Even the lord marshal doesn’t have it easy, Claudia thought. Victory celebrations like tonight, balls, and dinner parties—so often, it was events like these where the hierarchies of power amongst the nobility were decided. As such, everyone came clutching their own agendas, some grand, some petty. If you drew back the curtain on all the glamour, noble society was constantly engaged in games of power.

“All right, I’m digging in!” Olivia, indifferent to the ulterior motives of nobles, cheerfully stabbed a fork into the cake and, just like that, began wolfing it down. A maid standing behind her stared in helpless dismay.

She’s eating like that again... It’s like she doesn’t even care about everyone watching her.

Under normal circumstances, this was where Claudia would correct Olivia’s bad manners. But the enormous cake had been made *for Olivia*, and besides, they were at a banquet. She didn’t want to nag Olivia so much she spoiled her fun.

I shouldn’t say anything today. She decided to turn a blind eye to it.

“This is absolutely delicious! Claudia, hurry up and try it!” Olivia already had cream smeared all around her mouth as she beamed at Claudia.

“Yes, I think I will have a small piece,” Claudia said. Almost before she was finished, the maid, as if to remind them why she was there, cut her a slice and held it out to her. Forcing a smile, Claudia took a bite.

Oh, that’s good. In fact, it’s too good. The chefs royale had outdone themselves. She couldn’t think of a single flaw. *This is dangerous stuff. Everyone might say this is what your dessert stomach is for, but I’d better be careful not to eat too much.*

She chatted to Olivia for a time, all the while uncomfortably aware of her waistline, until she heard several peals of happy laughter from behind them. Not thinking much of it, she turned and saw a gaggle of young noblewomen gathered around a man with flaxen hair. He had pleasing features and smiled charmingly at everyone.

He's very popular. But I haven't seen his face before. I wonder who his family is. As she absently watched the man, he seemed to notice her gaze. Brushing off the young women who tried to keep him from leaving, he made his way toward her.

"My, my..." he said. "Rarely do I see a lady so radiantly beautiful, yet also so valiant. Will you do me the honor of allowing me to kiss your hand?"

This barrage of flattery set Claudia's teeth on edge. He knelt gallantly before her. Any other woman might have blushed, but not Claudia. It was plain the man had experience doing this routine with women, and she was not favorably impressed. Still, there was no allowing a breach of etiquette, so she couldn't turn him away out of hand.

I suppose I have to... she thought as she held her right hand out to the man. This drew shrill cries and daggerlike stares from the noblewomen, which made her smile despite herself. Compared to the people who really tried to murder her on the battlefield, they were positively adorable. The man didn't pay them any mind. He gracefully took her hand, then lightly pressed it to his lips. Standing up, he smiled at her, revealing pearly white teeth.

"There can be no one happier than I at this moment."

Claudia felt an icy chill race down her spine. She couldn't help her face stiffening as she replied, "Y-You're too kind." She'd just flunked out as a lady. If Lise Prussie were here, Claudia had no doubt she'd have teased her about it. If they were here as knights rather than as ladies, she might have even punched Lise in return.

The man seemed to misunderstand her reaction. He shook his head as though he found it lamentable. "You ought to be more fully aware of the power your beauty holds. How many men, I wonder, have been ensnared in your labyrinth of love?"

“Oh. I’ll try a little harder,” Claudia replied absently to the man’s ridiculous advice. Apparently, he’d interpreted her earlier attitude as a lack of confidence.

He’s silly as a goose, even though he’s built like a soldier, from the look of him. I just can’t stand frivolous men. Even Ashton would be better. Ashton’s face, in which she’d lately caught the occasional glimpse of rugged good looks, floated across her mind. Right now he was probably tucking into dinner at the Ashcrow Inn.

“Is the lady enjoying her dinner behind you your companion?” the man asked.

“Well, yes...”

“Might I trouble you for an introduction?” He was smiling, but to Claudia’s puzzlement, she caught a brief flash of something like wariness in his eyes.

“Yes, I don’t mind...” she replied. “Major Olivia?” she called hesitantly.

The fork in Olivia’s hand came to an abrupt halt, and she turned toward them. She looked like a squirrel stuffing its cheeks with food for the coming winter. Beside her, the maid looked down, her shoulders quivering.

“Major, when were you planning on telling me you’d become a squirrel? The cake isn’t going to run away. Swallow what’s in your mouth, please.”

Olivia nodded quickly, her jaw moving at incredible speed. She looked exactly like a squirrel. The man stared at her in utter astonishment.

“Okay, I’m done!” Olivia announced. “Who’s this?”

Claudia remembered she still hadn’t asked the man his name, another error that would disqualify her as a proper lady. No doubt her mother, Elizabeth, would scold her if she ever found out. It would be followed, Claudia had no trouble imagining, by an hour-long lecture. Although in this case, her companion was just as culpable for failing to introduce himself.

He stepped forward at once. “My name is Joshua Rikhart. And how beautiful you are! As if all the beauty in existence were given human form. Next to you, even the brightest gemstones would seem dull.”

“I’m Olivia Valedstorm,” Olivia replied. “I’m not really sure what you’re talking about, but if that’s all, can I go? There’s lots of other food I want to try besides

cake.” She looked over at the table laden with dishes as she spoke. Just then, the chamber musicians who sat in the highest space in the hall began to play *Pettecurica*, a classic Fernest song.

Cornelius took the hand of a noble lady and led her out to the center of the dance floor. Custom dictated that the person with the highest rank opened the dancing. Other couples followed them, stepping gracefully to the music.

“Lady Olivia, would you do me the honor of a dance?” Joshua put one hand to his breast as he held out the other with perfect elegance.

Olivia screwed up her face as though there could be no greater nuisance and said, “I don’t have time to dance. Weren’t you listening? I’ve got loads to eat.” She turned away from him with a huff. Joshua was left with his hand still outstretched, looking bewildered.

Claudia, who couldn’t help but feel sorry for him, whispered, “Major, unless you have a proper reason, it’s terrible manners to turn down a dance. You’re disgracing your partner.”

“But I just gave a proper reason.”

“That isn’t a reason. They’re going to bring out plenty more tasty food. Now hurry up, everyone’s watching.”

At some point, a great number of people had stopped to watch Olivia and Joshua. From the outside, they probably looked like the perfect couple. All the young noblewomen were stricken, while the men hung their heads in disappointment.

“Oh... But once the dancing is over, I can eat, right?” Olivia asked, worry in her eyes. Claudia nodded firmly to reassure her.

“Of course you can. You can eat as much as you like.”

“Okay, a quick dance then.” Olivia grabbed Joshua’s hand unceremoniously. With an awkward smile, he led her off toward the dance floor.

Oh, my... At first, Olivia and Joshua had been just another couple amongst the other elegant dancers, but now they were the only ones left on the dance floor.

Everyone else watched them, speechless. As well they might. What Olivia and Joshua were doing was less dancing than—

They move like they're dueling, Claudia thought. But how do they manage to still look so beautiful?

It was as though Olivia and Joshua were reading and reacting to their partner's every move. Their footwork was precise and fluid as they traveled up, down, and across the hall. Olivia's scarlet dress twirled spectacularly with every graceful pirouette. Claudia realized the music had grown wilder. They were playing *The Erlking's Caprice*, a piece about a fairy king who urged the hero to chase after an impossible romance. Looking at the musicians, she saw their brows were damp with sweat as they played on with desperate intensity. It was as though they too were caught up in Olivia and Joshua's dance.

At last, as Joshua drew Olivia into an embrace, the piece came to an end. There was a moment of stillness, then the room broke out in thunderous applause for the couple. The musicians slumped back in their chairs, exhausted.

"Lady Olivia, I had a truly wonderful time with you. Allow me to once more express my gratitude." Joshua bowed deeply.

"I actually had fun too," Olivia replied.

"I am glad to hear it. I'm sure we shall meet again, but for tonight, I must take my leave."

"You won't stay for the feast?"

"What I've already received this evening is far better than any feast," Joshua said, smiling. Then, bidding farewell to the young ladies who crowded around him, he left the hall. Claudia came over to join Olivia as she watched him leave.

"Who *is* he? At first, I thought he was just an empty-headed fool, but now..." Claudia hadn't missed that, beneath his graceful movements, Joshua had an edge to him like a freshly sharpened knife. Olivia must have felt it too. The only other person who looked like they might have noticed something was Cornelius, who was stroking his beard.

"I don't know. He didn't seem like a rat, though."

“A rat...” Claudia’s eyes widened. “It can’t be!”

Olivia only smiled thinly at her, before heading for the feast table.

Chapter Six: Magic and Magecraft

I

Elspere, capital of the Holy Land of Mekia

After putting Leticia Castle behind him, Joshua boarded a carriage waiting in the square. The driver lit the lanterns and then flicked his reins, setting the two horses trundling steadily away from the castle gates.

I didn't expect Fis to be so peaceful, Joshua thought. Are they imposing strict controls on the people, or is it just that no one is worried...? If you cut out this scene, you'd never know the kingdom is on the verge of ruin.

They passed a man and woman walking arm in arm, and another man drunk and swaying, all vanishing from his sight as quickly as they appeared. At last, when Leticia Castle was no more than a speck in the distance, he heard a soft knock on the outside of the coach. Without delay, the door opened, and a man slipped inside.

No sooner had he sat down to face Joshua than the man asked, "I trust you didn't run into any difficulties?" His false eye glittered.

"No, you set the stage beautifully. My hat's off to the owls, as usual."

Fernest might be weakened, but its defenses were not so lax that a person of unknown circumstances could stroll in unchallenged. Especially not at a banquet attended by the marshal, not to mention other high-ranking officers and powerful nobles. He'd only gotten in thanks to the owls' proficiency in manipulating the facts.

"You're too kind. Senior Thousand-Wing Johann—"

"Whoa there. I'm not Johann Strider right now, I'm Joshua Rikhart, provincial Fernest noble," Johann said with a grin.

Zephyr gave him a strained smile. "I beg your pardon. I hope you'll excuse me, given our location. Now, what did you make of the *target*?"

“Olivia Valedstorm...” Johann said thoughtfully. “Well, they were quite right to call her divinely beautiful. You won’t find loveliness like hers, even in Mekia. I don’t think anyone’s set my heart aflutter like that before.”

As Johann reminisced on Olivia, the apparent embodiment of beauty itself, Zephyr waited, long-suffering. “Yes, I share your opinion on her appearance,” he said at last. “With the exception of the seraph, that is. But that’s not what I was asking about.”

Johann laughed. “Yes, I know. To be succinct, she’s a monster. It’s no wonder the empire is struggling so badly. Though to ordinary folks, we mages probably look like monsters too.”

His invitation to Olivia to dance hadn’t been made on a whim, nor to show off. He’d thought that, even if it were only a dance, he could take stock of her abilities if he saw how she moved. He’d planned to make a pass at her when she let her guard down, but in the end, it had been all he could do just to keep up with her. Her physical power was just that exceptional.

“I knew you’d feel it too, Lord Johann. The girl seems to exist far beyond the usual limits of humanity.”

“They weren’t exaggerating when they called her a Death God.”

“Indeed.” Zephyr agreed wholeheartedly. Now and then, the coach bounced. They must have left the paved roads. Johann gazed out over the plains, illuminated by silver moonlight.

“I think your assessment was right on the mark,” he said to Zephyr. “If I really want to know the extent of her powers, I’ll have to put my life on the line and face her.” He rubbed his head and laughed to lighten the mood. Zephyr’s face, reflected in the glass, looked like he’d swallowed something unpleasant.

“Lord Johann, the Holy Land of Mekia cannot afford to lose you. Be sure you do not forget the seraph’s instructions to you.”

“Don’t worry about that. Forget the seraph. If I die, Amelia will come and kick my headstone in. And more importantly, there are the women who’d grieve for me—I’d need more fingers than I possess to count them all. I could never inflict such cruelty upon them.” Turning back to Zephyr, Johann jokingly pretended to

count off on his fingers. In truth, he could include his toes and still perhaps come up short. He was a philanthropist—no one loved people more than Johann.

“That is reassuring to hear,” Zephyr replied. “Should you need us, however, know that the owls are your shield.” His face was set with determination.

Johann sighed, then looked Zephyr dead in the eye. “Let’s get one thing straight. You owls are just as indispensable to Mekia. You’d get an earful from the seraph if she heard what you just said, so make sure I never hear you talk like that again.”

“The owls thank you,” Zephyr said at length, bowing his head low. Just then, they heard the horses neigh as the coach came to an abrupt stop. Both Johann and Zephyr pitched forward, each holding onto the other to keep their seats. The little window in the front of the compartment opened and the driver’s face appeared.

“What happened?” Johann demanded.

“Terribly sorry, m’lords. Looks like we’ve been surrounded by bandits.”

“Bandits? How many?”

“About fifty, by my reckoning,” the driver said. He sounded quite calm.

Johann scoffed. “Did you hear that? A whole platoon’s worth of bandits for a single coach. Aren’t we popular?”

“I’ll clear the way,” said Zephyr, already reaching for the door. Johann placed a firm hand on his shoulder.

“I’ll do it.”

“You, my lord?” Zephyr’s momentary surprise was immediately replaced by apprehension, and he implored Johann to reconsider. “They’re only bandits. Kill their leader, and they’ll scatter. I don’t see any need for you to fight them yourself...”

“Oh, hush. This is just what I need to limber up before I test out Olivia. I haven’t done this in a long time.” He smiled, holding up the back of his hand, into which was tattooed the Blazelight mage circle.

Bernard and his band formed a tight ring around the black coach with its intricate engraving. Gazing at it, he licked his lips.

If whoever's in there can afford to travel around in a ride like that, we can squeeze as much cash out of them as we like. Tonight's our lucky night.

Bernard's band of outlaws prowled the Summ Plains to the south of the royal capital. Lately, not a single prize had fallen into their clutches. They'd gotten careless in doing their work here too many times, and word had spread.

Bernard had just been thinking that maybe it was time they looked for new hunting grounds when this expensive coach without any guards appeared, its wheels clattering loudly as though they wanted to be noticed. It was easy money.

The other bandits heckled the coach, waving their weapons at the windows.

"Hey! You want to hurry up and get out of there, or we'll burn your pretty coach!"

"Maybe they're too *afwaid* to come out!"

"Hey! Mister half-wit coachman! Yeah, I'm talking to you! Tell your half-wit master to get out here already!"

They were a bunch of idiots, but they knew the coach would fetch a high price, so they wouldn't damage it. The occupants at last seemed to resign themselves to their fate, and the gold-edged door swung slowly open.

Bernard was delighted with what he saw. *Some hoity-toity noble kid, just as I thought.* He licked his lips again, looking at the delicate young man with handsome features who emerged. He looked like he was on the way home from a party. He was dressed in pure white, embroidered lavishly with gold and silver thread. That would fetch a pretty penny too. A man with a false eye in a gray cloak followed, taking his time. Bernard thought he was very oddly dressed for a servant, but then he caught a glimpse of a large coin purse hidden under the cloak and the thought was driven from his mind.

"Finally," he said, peering into the coach and humming as he asked, "Just you

two, is it? No women, hmm?”

The delicate young man looked perplexed. “There are no women. As you can well see.”

With a hiss of frustration, Bernard said, “Too bad, then. Can’t be getting greedy now. Anyway, hand over everything you’ve got on you. Then we can talk.” Bernard stuck out his hand, but the young man only stared and didn’t say a word. The man with the false eye didn’t move either.

“Hey! You think you can both just clam up? Or are you so scared you lost your tongues?”

Crass laughter rose up from the other bandits. The young man spread his arms foolishly.

“I beg your pardon. This is a little novel to me. I found myself quite enchanted for a moment there. But don’t worry, I don’t mean it like *that*,” he added. “Are bandits always so rough around the edges?”

“With bandits, you can do a lot worse, Lord Joshua. These ones are relatively well groomed.”

“Looking like *that*?” asked the man called Joshua, looking incredulously at the bandits. The man with the false eye smirked.

“There are some who give off such a stench it’ll turn your stomach. In fact, that’s normal for bandits. They are creatures unacquainted with hygiene.”

“So that’s what bandits are like.”

“It is indeed.” The pair of them laughed breezily, undeterred by the fifty-odd bandits who surrounded them. It was a show of disrespect, and Bernard felt the stirrings of anger within him, accompanied by faint doubt.

“What’s with the cool guy act? You’re not thinking you can take on all of us with only three of you, are you?” Bernard raised his right hand. At once, the bandits all raised their weapons, eyes glinting. An ordinary person faced with that would be weeping and begging for their life.

But the two men were unfazed. Usually, the drivers made a run for it, but theirs hadn’t moved an inch from his box. He watched them expressionlessly.

Bernard's impression was that, rather than being too scared to move, he didn't see any need to.

"For future reference, what would you have done if there were a woman with us?"

"Huh?!" one of the bandits exclaimed in a harsh voice. "Obviously we'd throw her down and all have a turn with her! Quit changing the subject!"

At once, Joshua's smile vanished, and his eyes narrowed. "What a disgusting thing to say," he said. "Were you raised by beasts? Any man who so despises women doesn't deserve to live."

He flicked a finger and Bernard heard an earsplitting scream from behind him. He turned and was met with the horrifying sight of a man with his right arm engulfed in flame.

"Ah, ah, ah, ah! Why's my arm burning?!"

"H-Hell if I know!"

"Someone...someone put him out already!"

"I don't just have water on me!"

The flaming bandit rolled desperately on the ground trying to extinguish the flames, but they burned bright as ever. While the others ran around in a panic, the *click* of the man's fingers rang out through the night. The prone bandit's left arm burst into flames, followed by his right leg, then his left leg. Finally, his head was engulfed in a ball of fire, and he went still.

The other bandits all stared in silence at the smoldering corpse. Bernard's mouth had gone dry as a bone. He gulped, desperately trying to restore some moisture, then turned to Joshua, fighting back fear as he asked, "Did...did you do that?"

"You don't have anyone who can do the same sort of thing, do you?" Joshua replied with a thin smile. "If you do, the Winged Crusaders would be only too happy to recruit them."

From that, Bernard understood he must belong to an army, but that was all. It didn't explain how he'd conjured up fire.

I could see it if he'd sprayed them with oil and then set them alight. But he didn't do anything like that, just clicked his fingers and the man was burning. No one can do a trick like that! As sweat poured off him, Bernard was gripped by unspeakable terror. At the same time, he had a realization. Whatever this man in front of him was, he was higher up the food chain than Bernard. There was only one thing to do against such a foe.

"Run!" he screamed. The other bandits, seeing Bernard take off like a rabbit sprung from a snare, all began scrambling to get away first. But it was too late.

"You can't think I'd just let you go," said Joshua. A great wall of flame sprang up in front of Bernard and the others, blocking their way.

What the hell is going on here?! Bernard's thoughts were muddled. None of what was happening seemed real. He tried running right, then left, but every time, flames sprang up to deny his retreat until at last he and most of the other bandits were penned up in a ring of fire. Even those who escaped the flames ran into the coach driver, who had climbed down while no one was looking. He beat them all to death.

"Please, let us go!"

"We'd never have attacked you if we knew you could do miracles like this!"

Joshua gazed coldly at the bandits as they begged for their lives. It was only a matter of time before the flames reached them.

"Joshua—Mister Joshua, we can negotiate."

"Negotiate?"

"That's right! I can make you a deal that'll be to your advantage!"

Joshua rubbed his chin, then said, "All right. You have my curiosity. Now speak."

"Now we're talking! Okay, if you let us go, I'll give you the riches we've got at our hideout! And women, we've got a few fine specimens we keep there! I'll throw all of them in for you too!"

"Fine specimens, you say?"

"Yeah! They all sing real pretty. Only thing is, we sliced their heels to stop

them running away, but that's no big deal, right? There's no downside for you, Mister Joshua. In fact, there's only upsides! So, how about it?" Bernard rushed to make his case. They could steal more gold. There were more women to kidnap. The only thing he couldn't replace was his life, which looked very close to being snuffed out at the moment. *Please, please accept the offer!*

His desperate wishes were in vain, however. Joshua looked at him as though he were a worm.

"Blazelight Vortex. Hear me, o ones who meet my flames. I shall purge thee and leave no trace." As Joshua closed his left hand, there was a surge of red light. The ring of flames writhed, then rapidly contracted. The bandits closest to the edge began to burn, letting out screams of agony as they crumbled into dust.

Bernard cackled. "This is insane! It can't be really happening! Yes, that's it! This is a dream! It's just a bad dream!" The scene before him was the stuff of nightmares. He just gazed up at the sky as laughter bubbled up from his parched throat.

"Very well done, my lord. It was a pleasure to see magecraft in its very essence."

Joshua looked at Zephyr. "Leave one alive. They'll take us to their hideout."

"Understood!" Zephyr, who had a struggling bandit locked in a grapple, took out a dagger and held it to the man's throat as he replied. A sudden gust of wind swept through, throwing up great clouds of ash that had once been the bandits into the night air. Johann and the others watched in silence.

II

Two days after the victory banquet at Leticia Castle, Olivia, Claudia, and Ashton walked across the Sain Jerim Plaza under a cloudless blue sky. They were heading for the Royal Library. As always, many and varied kinds of stalls lined the market, and cheerful voices rang through the air. The excitement of the victory hadn't yet faded.

Ashton was the son of a merchant family, so he wasn't immune to the wild enthusiasm that filled the city. He was just thinking about how much time had passed since he'd last seen his parents.

"The cake and the banquet at the castle were so good, weren't they? I wonder if I'll get to eat there again... I hope I do..."

Olivia started humming as she went along, sticking her head mainly into shops that sold food. Now and then, the touch of the gentle breeze lightly tousled her silver hair, making the locks shimmer in the sunlight.

"Does that mean you didn't get enough? Didn't you stuff your face at the castle?" Ashton said in exasperation. Olivia looked at him, wide-eyed and blinking.

"Didn't you know, Ashton? There's no limit to how much delicious food humans can eat."

"Uh, uh, that's definitely just you, Olivia. Normal people have to stop at some point, no matter how good the food is. Lieutenant Claudia was at her wit's end with you. Weren't you?" He turned to Claudia beside him, seeking her agreement. Apparently, Olivia had shocked everyone with her display of gluttony at the feast. She'd even tried to take the leftovers home with her until Claudia had stood between her and the food to prevent this. Claudia's haggard expression as she'd told him *You could have fried an egg on my face* had left a particularly heavy impression on him.

"Yes, I still can't believe the *amount* she can eat when she's so tiny. And yet she never puts on an ounce of weight. I wish *I* could do that." Her smile was strained as she shot a glance at Olivia.

Looking at her properly, Ashton noticed that she kept rubbing her stomach. That gesture on top of what she'd said made it all click into place.

"Lieutenant Claudia, you're not worried that you're getting fat, are you? You don't need to be. You're still thin; it hasn't made you any less attractive."

She might not have been aware herself, but amongst the soldiers, Claudia was held in extremely high regard. With her almond-shaped eyes, sharp nose, and well-formed lips, she was a beauty by anyone's standard. The way she engaged

with commoners without prejudice only compounded her popularity. A little extra weight wouldn't make a whit of difference.

Despite Ashton's pure intentions, however, Claudia was clearly displeased by the comment. "*Ashton Senefelder*," she ground out, using his full name. For good measure, an icy smile crawled across her face. By the time Ashton realized he'd spoken out of turn, it was too late. Claudia's hand shot out, and she yanked hard on his ear.

"Ow, ow, ow!" he squawked. "Lieutenant Claudia, that hurts! Hey, that really hurts! Let go of my ear!"

Hearing his shouts, a woman passing by whispered *Siblings?* to her companion, who replied, *Aren't they sweet?* They both tittered. Claudia cleared her throat once, then released Ashton's ear with a huff.

"How is it that you never know when to shut up? I am actually a girl too. It hurts when you're that blunt. You'll never be able to get a girlfriend, talking like that."

Ashton, his heart thumping, quickly looked around for Olivia. For some reason, she was keeping a few paces behind them. What was more, she was looking at them warily.

What's she worried about? Ashton wondered, bewildered. *Oh, well. No good worrying. It's hardly the first time Olivia's acted strangely. At least she isn't asking any uncomfortable questions.* Privately relieved, Ashton turned back to Claudia. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean it like that."

"Whether you did or you didn't, you ought to consider your actions a little more carefully. And to take *particular* care when commenting on a woman's appearance."

"Yes, ser. I'll be careful from now on," Ashton said, bowing.

"Good," Claudia said shortly, then, as he continued to be despondent, she grinned and roughly tousled his hair. That *really* made him feel like her little brother. It was an odd feeling.

But if Lieutenant Claudia really was my big sister, that'd be no picnic... She'd probably lecture me over every little thing. When she gets married, she'll be the

one wearing the trousers in that relationship for sure. He glanced up in the middle of this insulting train of thought and saw a bird fluttering through the sky that let out a piercing cry. It was the distinctive call of the equinox bird. Throughout Fernest, their migration heralded the coming of spring. For those who tilled the land, the cry of the equinox bird was their signal to sow seeds.

“Spring is here already,” Ashton said.

“Hm?” Claudia looked up, then said, a little emotionally, “Oh, yes. Everything is so vibrant with life this season.”

“Did you know that there are all sorts of delicious things to catch in spring?” Olivia, appearing beside them, mimed shooting a bow as she said, “Patriarch lizards, giant grizzlies, then there’s spotted boar and vampire birds. Oh, and—” Every creature that she listed was classified as a dangerous beast, and class two to boot—that meant they were all dangerous to humans. Any ordinary person who encountered one would run for their life without thinking twice. It was too much of a bother to point this out every time, though, so Ashton decided to let Olivia talk.

“You’re truly unwavering, aren’t you?” he said at last.

Olivia giggled. “That’s what’s so great about me!” she said, then, starting to hum again, she strode away before them, her head held high.

About an hour after leaving the Ashcrow Inn, they passed by rows of stately mansions until they saw the Royal Library across the main street. Olivia ran over to the guardhouse and presented her knight’s badge.

“Hey, mind if I drop in?” she asked.

“Well, if it isn’t Major Olivia,” said the clerk. “Of course. All our doors are open to you.” He stood up and saluted smartly, then turned to his underling. “Well? What are you dragging your feet for? Hurry up and show Major Olivia in!”

“O-Of course!”

“I don’t need you to show me, I’ve already come here four times,” Olivia said, but the man immediately shook his head.

“I’m afraid that won’t do. Please, follow me.” The man set off ahead, stooping subserviently. This puzzled Ashton. He hadn’t been there for the first visit, but he hadn’t seen the clerks act like this on the other three days they’d come. Beside him, he saw Claudia grimacing. She seemed to know what was going on.

“What’s all this?” he asked. She stared at him, bemused.

“You are unexpectedly dense. It’s because they all heard about the major’s exploits on the Central Front.”

“Oh, so that’s it.”

If the story of Olivia vanquishing all the enemy generals and saving the Second Legion from certain doom had reached the clerks, that certainly would explain their attitude. The guards’ reactions were even more transparent—they stood stiffly to attention and didn’t budge.

“They’re a bit over the top, but this is more or less the norm for the military. Especially when we’re at war, like now.”

“I suppose Olivia’s exploits are somewhat exceptional, aren’t they?” Ashton said. There’d even been talk of promotion.

He was just thinking that for Olivia, promotion was a done deal, when Claudia said seriously, “Don’t think this has nothing to do with you, Ashton. You may end up getting special treatment.”

“Me? As if.” He snorted with laughter, but Claudia grew frustrated.

“This is no laughing matter. The top commanders think highly of your talents. As I’ve told you before, you should acknowledge your own achievements.”

“Oh, come on. You need to work on your material, Lieutenant.” Claudia looked at him in stony silence. “You *are* joking, right?”

To his bewilderment, she let out a long, deliberate sigh. “You listen to me,” she said, with the air of one explaining something to a child. “After the fall of Kier Fortress, the Royal Army saw nothing but defeat. The empire had a knife to our throat. Are you with me so far?”

“Um, yes,” Ashton said, nodding jerkily.

“Since you and the major showed up, the state of the war has changed

entirely. The Imperial Army withdrew from the south *and* the north, and now they've been driven from the central front. The empire still has the upper hand, but it's a dramatic shift when you look at where we were a year ago."

"I appreciate that, but that was pretty much all Olivia's doing." Ashton acknowledged that he'd had his own share of success, but he wasn't shameless enough to allow himself to be put on the same pedestal as Olivia.

"It was yours as well. That's why the top commanders value you so highly. It goes without saying that that includes the major."

Ashton felt suddenly weighed down as he was struck by a vision of the future of the entire kingdom resting on his shoulders. If his parents heard this conversation, they'd pass out from shock. A year and a half ago, he'd been nothing but an ordinary student.

"The truth is," he said at length, "it's hard. This is too heavy a burden for me."

"I'm sorry. I don't want to put pressure on you. But I'm here with you. If you're ever in danger, I'm at least strong enough to protect you," Claudia finished, then patted her sword. The kindness and strength of her words made Ashton feel pathetic for whining at her. This endless war must have weighed on Claudia as well, but she said she'd protect him. How could he call himself a man if he stopped here?

"I hope you'll continue to give me guidance, ser. And lectures, where necessary."

Claudia snorted. "This is what I'm talking about. You talk too much." She tapped him lightly on the forehead, then held her hand out to him. "But anyway. I'm counting on you too, Ashton."

As they exchanged a firm handshake—their second—a voice like a bell called out from ahead.

"Ashton, Claudia, what are you doing? *Hurry up!*" Olivia was waving at them, beaming. Ashton and Claudia looked at each other, then, without knowing why, they found themselves smiling.

Ashton followed the clerk assigned to guide them into the library. As he entered, his eyes found Claryss's as she organized the shelves with the other librarians.

"What's this? If it isn't Ashton Senefelder! I'm glad to see Comrade Olivia and Claudia safe and sound too." She placed her feet on the side rails of her ladder and slid nimbly down to the ground. Olivia, delighted, immediately tried to go over to the ladder, but Claudia caught her by her collar and held her back. Ignoring the disapproving stares of the other librarians, Claryss pushed up her signature red-rimmed glasses with a grin.

"I'm glad to see you well too, Claryss. But what are you smiling about?" Ashton asked dubiously.

"I heard all about it," she said. "Cutting down one enemy general after another, unleashing hell upon the enemy, and *then* you had one of the empire's Three Generals and the Helios Knights put their tails between their legs and run back to Kier Fortress."

"I don't know about unleashing hell..." Ashton said. "Anyway, how do you know so much about it when you're only a civilian? That seems a bit fishy to me."

"Yes," Claudia agreed, sounding suspicious. "Ashton's right. You know a little too much." Naturally, the Royal Army's official announcements hadn't gone into so much detail.

In response to Ashton's accusing stare, Claryss took his arm and leaned in to bring her glossy pink lips to his ear. "For a commissioned officer, methinks you doth protest too much, *Major* Ashton Senefelder."

"What? I'm just a warrant officer," Ashton corrected her, flustered. Claryss gave him a coy smile.

"From what I hear, they'll be calling you major one day soon," she said.

"Is this another one of your famous prophecies? I'm sorry to disappoint you, but you'll be waiting for all eternity for that day to arrive." Aware of Olivia's gaze, he shook his arm free of hers. "And back off a little."

Claryss snorted. "You're as fun to tease as ever."

“Anyway, how did you hear about what happened?” he asked.

“Just who do you think you’re talking to?” she said smugly. “Getting ahold of that kind of information was child’s play.”

Here, Ashton remembered how back in the day, Claryss had known everything about all the goings-on at the Royal Lion Academy, from trivialities like where the principal’s secret stash of liquor was hidden to organizational secrets which the students were under no circumstances to know, like the academy’s operating costs.

“Well, okay, you always *were* a bit enigmatic.”

Claryss chuckled. “A dash of enigma is what gives a lady her mystique,” she said, pressing a finger to her lips with an alluring smile.

No sooner had she shown them into the reading room than she hurried away again, returning soon after with a book in her arms. She sat down next to Olivia.

“Did you discover what happened to the Valedstorms?” Ashton asked. The throwaway question elicited a powerful response from Olivia. She pulled her chair right up to Claryss, breathing heavily.

“Did you find it?!”

“C-Comrade Olivia, could you give me a little space? You’re so close you’re making me blush,” Claryss said, uncharacteristically ruffled.

“Okay!” Olivia said. She nodded to show she’d understood but made no effort to back away. If anything, she leaned in closer. She was so overexcited her body wasn’t following her mouth.

“Er, well, never mind. Something smells so delightful it’s making my head spin, but let’s just jump right into it.”

The eyes of the other three went to the black-bound book on the table. The title *The Clan of Darkness* was written on the cover along with the name of its author, Angus Iem White. His title was given as former assistant chief-of-staff to the Kingdom of Fernest.

I remember that title, Ashton thought. I’m sure that’s the book I found the day before we left Fis...

As though she'd read his mind, Claryss nodded. "Yes, Ashton Senefelder found this book. We ran out of time in the end and had to return it, but I went back and read it later. To sum up, I learned that in ancient times, there existed a Clan of Darkness from which the House of Valedstorm was descended. The reason their line died out appears to be related." She opened the book to a page she'd marked. Ashton rapidly ran his eyes over the contents, where it was indeed written that the House of Valedstorm was the Clan of Darkness.

"But what's this Clan of Darkness?" Claudia asked as she turned the pages. "I mean, I can tell from 'darkness' that it's not going to be anything good..."

"According to this book, they were a small clan who went against the so-called True King. They were apparently formidable warriors and plotted to overthrow him."

"A small clan overthrowing a king? That's a bit far-fetched, isn't it?"

"As I've said before, history is always written by the victors. Only those who were there at the time know the truth," Claryss said with an exaggerated shrug. Ashton agreed with her. He'd read a colossal number of books in his time, so he knew there was no shortage of cock-and-bull stories. One could only judge their truth on the basis of one's own knowledge.

"All right. Let's assume for now that the story is true. Did the Valedstorms plot to usurp the throne like their ancestors?"

"No, the Valedstorms were known for their unwavering loyalty to the kingdom. Also, it says that no one knew they were descended from the Clan of Darkness back at the time."

"Then what *happened*?" Claudia said, sounding defeated. If this was all true, there was no explanation of the end of the Valedstorm line.

"There was a secret tip-off. Someone told the king that the Valedstorms were descended from usurpers who had long ago tried to depose a king, and that now, after untold years, they had their sights set on the throne of Fernest."

"Oh, come on. Weren't they unwavering in their loyalty?" This time Ashton spoke up, looking at Claryss. "This secret informant came out of nowhere and the king actually believed them?"

“This was in the ninth century of Tempus Fugit, so it’s not unreasonable to think so,” she said matter-of-factly. “You know what I mean, don’t you, Ashton Senefelder?”

The ninth century... he thought. *Yes, I see.*

The ninth century of Tempus Fugit was commonly known as The Black Years. It was an era of restlessness and uncertainty, as all were worn down by a war from which there seemed to be no escape. It was in the midst of all this that the anonymous tip-off had come and shook the royal family to its core. Without questioning its truthfulness, they had rushed to cut out the rot before it could spread.

In the present day, it would have been subjected to close investigation, but taking into consideration the state of society at the time, Ashton thought it was perhaps only natural that things had played out as they did. That was probably what Claryss had meant.

“So were all the Valedstorms murdered in the end?” asked Olivia, who had been listening in silence. Her expression had turned serious and Claryss, seeing her like this for the first time, gulped.

“In regard to that, Comrade Olivia, I really don’t know. It’s written that the family estate was surrounded and even set on fire, but there’s nothing about whether they lived or died. Though there was one part that caught my attention.” Claryss riffled through the pages, then pointed to a line:

A number of soldiers reported seeing a large shape swathed in black mist fly out from the window of the burning mansion. What it was remains a mystery.

Black mist. Unconsciously, Ashton looked at Olivia’s sword. Claudia must have had the same thought. Her eyes went back and forth between Olivia and the sword.

Meanwhile, Olivia’s eyes burnt bright, the corners of her mouth stretching up as far as they could go. There was a wildness in her eyes that made Ashton hesitate to talk to her.

Claryss, who didn’t know about the sword, went on. “This is the only odd point. Who knows what this shape swathed in black mist could be? The incident

isn't mentioned before or after this one page. Oh, and they were unable to find any evidence that the Valedstorms were planning to usurp the throne."

"In other words, they were wrongly accused..." Claudia murmured.

"My guess is that the royal family felt guilty after condemning the Valedstorms without any evidence when they'd always been loyal."

"I mean, even if the Valedstorms were descended from this Clan of Darkness, that was ancient history. It had nothing to do with anyone alive at the time."

"I think that's what's behind the end of the Valedstorm line not being recorded. Under normal circumstances, the whole house would have been expunged. I imagine Angus Lem White wrote this book as a kind of atonement as well." Claryss shut the book, then sighed heavily.

"Do you happen to know the identity of the person who tipped off the king?" Ashton asked. That unprovoked attack was what had set the whole thing off in the first place, and he'd noticed that Claryss hadn't mentioned it.

"No, there's nothing mentioned about that either. Maybe the author didn't know himself. Either that, or he knew but deliberately neglected to mention it..."

The conversation trailed off into silence, which lasted until Olivia piped up cheerfully. "Claryss, Claudia, Ashton. Thank you for helping me with this. I was right to take the Valedstorm name."

Claryss looked at her questioningly. "What do you mean by that?" she asked, but Olivia only told her not to worry. She stretched, her face radiant. Ashton wanted to hear more himself, but he wasn't going to press it if Olivia didn't want to talk about it. Everyone had their reasons, after all.

After leaving the library, the three of them wandered aimlessly through the streets.

"Just like that, it's over. What are we going to do now?" Ashton asked, turning back to Claudia. She gave him a crooked smile.

"Yes, I thought it would take at least a few days," she said. Olivia, who walked

a few paces ahead of them, came to an abrupt halt.

“All right, then,” she said, “how about we go find something good to eat? It’s lunchtime.” Just as she suggested it, the bell tower rang out, striking the noontime hour. It was such perfect timing that Ashton grinned despite himself.

“Good idea,” he said. “All right, since we’re here, let’s check out the street stalls.”

“Street stalls! I love it!” Olivia agreed, delighted.

“Does that sound good to you, Lieutenant Claudia?”

“That sounds fine to me,” she said.

“And to me. I almost never get to eat at street stalls,” came a voice from behind them. They all whirled around to see a young man with handsome features, wearing a smile that revealed pearly white teeth.

IV

“You...!” Claudia cried, thunderstruck.

“Do you know him?”

“I do, from the banquet.” Even as she replied to Ashton, Claudia didn’t take her eyes off of the man. He introduced himself as Joshua Rikhart, a noble from Fernest’s provinces. He was good-looking, with well-balanced features and silky flaxen hair. He was also a full head taller than Ashton. Combined with the litheness of his bearing, Ashton thought he was probably popular with the ladies.

Joshua smiled awkwardly, then turned to Ashton. “I don’t believe we’ve met. Are you going to introduce yourself?”

“Oh! E-Excuse me. I’m Ashton Senefelder,” he blurted. Joshua looked mildly surprised.

“Gosh, so you’re the genius tactician. I’ve heard so much about the Seventh Legion’s activities. You know, I’d heard it already, but you really don’t look how one would expect—but perhaps that’s what makes you so formidable...” Having

apparently satisfied himself, he nodded, while Ashton squirmed at the words “genius tactician.” Claudia stepped swiftly forward to put herself between Ashton and Joshua. Looking at her properly, he saw that her stance was ever so slightly lowered and her hand was on her sword. She looked like she might draw at any moment.

“Lieutenant Claudia?” he said nervously.

“Listen, you shut up and stay behind me,” she snapped, then turned to Joshua. “Now, what business does a provincial noble have with us?”

Joshua shook his head at Claudia’s overt display of caution. “Oh, don’t be like that,” he said. “Whatever has you so on guard? You’re still lovely even with that severe expression, Lady Claudia Jung, but women are always prettiest when they smile.”

There was a pause. “I don’t remember telling you my name,” Claudia said. Her voice had dropped to a growl. Ashton heard the crunch of gravel underfoot.

“Yes, I know it was rude of me, but I took the liberty of having my attendant look into you. The next in line to the great warrior House of Jung. It was discourteous on my part not to ask such a beautiful lady her name. I do hope you’ll forgive me.” Joshua knelt on the ground and bowed. It was a truly elegant gesture, and women passing along the street turned to gaze at him with rapturous expressions. It was enough to make Ashton think that, if he were a woman, he’d likely have blushed too.

But it had no such effect on Claudia. On the contrary, her brow furrowed. “Cut out the theatrics,” she said, obviously annoyed. “How about you answer my question from before?”

“I was merely proposing that we go for lunch together. I had no notion of being held in such suspicion...” Joshua stood up, then scratched his head awkwardly. Ashton couldn’t work out what had Claudia so on edge as to reach for her sword either. She said that they’d met at the banquet, but no one had mentioned any trouble.

“You think you can play innocent? At the very least, I know you’re more than you let on. Why would we even go and eat with—?”

“Okay, okay.” Olivia stepped between them, patting Claudia on the shoulder to bring down her guard. “Why not? When eating, the more, the merrier.”

“But Major, this man...”

“Lady Olivia Valedstorm, you have my most sincere gratitude for your kindness,” Joshua said, jumping on Olivia’s offer with an affable smile. “Please allow me to buy you all lunch from the stalls, as a token of my thanks.”

Ashton hadn’t detected in Joshua’s words or manner any of the particular acerbity and arrogance that nobility often carried. In fact, he found himself liking him. The man seemed to have a gift for it.

“Your treat?” Olivia asked Joshua.

“That’s right.”

“So it’s all right if I eat heaps?” Her eyes shone with expectation. It was beyond Ashton to work out why being treated would mean it was all right to eat a lot, but Joshua responded in the affirmative, putting his hand to his breast.

“But of course. Joshua Rikhart never goes back on his word.”

“Hooray!”

Looking at Joshua’s clothes with the eye of a merchant’s son, Ashton noted the liberal use of high-quality fabric. It was plain that he was from a prosperous house. Buying lunch at street stalls would be nothing to him. But he also didn’t know the bottomless pit that was Olivia’s stomach.

“Lord Joshua, for want of a better way to put it, Olivia eats a *lot*. Enough to freak out everyone around her.”

Joshua looked blankly at Ashton for a moment, then burst out laughing. “Oh, Ashton. That’s a fine thing, is it not? All the more reason for me to treat her.” He gave Ashton a cheerful pat on the back, a friendly gesture most unlike a noble. Here, Ashton once again found himself speaking before he could stop himself.

“There’ll be no taking it back later. Olivia left the word ‘restraint’ behind in her mother’s womb.”

“What a colorful turn of phrase. One could perhaps say that I left behind the

word ‘devotion,’” Joshua mused with a faraway smile. As Ashton tried to parse what he meant by that, Olivia tugged on his sleeve.

“Are you done? Let’s go eat already.” Bored with their conversation, she trotted off, forcing them to bring it to a close. Ashton and Joshua looked at each other and shrugged, before following her. Claudia brought up the rear, the only one who didn’t let Joshua out of her sight.

As usual, the stallkeepers called out enthusiastically to Ashton and the others as they approached. There were more than twice as many people milling about as there had been that morning. As it was the lunch hour, the cries of the food stall proprietors carried above the rest.

“All righty!” Olivia declared, rolling up her sleeves. “It’s free, so eat up!” She dashed off toward the stalls. The rest of them followed her into an alley, where shops that had been closed that morning were just opening for business. The most eye-catching were the clothier stalls. Fernest was famous for manufacturing cloth of higher quality than any other nation. The textile industry was one of the kingdom’s most vital exports. Here, the shops were full of exquisite fabrics no street stall anywhere else in the world would carry.

They walked, Joshua looking around in amazement as Ashton guided him. After a while, they saw Olivia standing in front of a stall eating something. On the sign on the roof, red letters spelled out *SMOKED GRAY BOAR SANDWICHES —A FIS DELICACY*. In all the years Ashton had lived in the capital, he’d never heard the food in question referred to as a Fis delicacy.

As he was shaking his head at the sign, the little stallkeeper called out to them, a little desperately. “Er, are you lot this soldier’s friends?” When Claudia answered that they were, he looked thoroughly relieved. “Oh thank goodness. She said someone would come later to pay, then started eating one thing after another. I didn’t want to talk too harshly to a soldier...” He glanced at Olivia, who was chomping on a boar sandwich. “Hey...” he said reluctantly.

“Oh, look! That looks tasty too!”

“Oi! Olivia, hold up!” Ashton shouted, grabbing for her, but she slipped through his fingers and scampered away down the alley. Before he could give

chase, she vanished into the thronging crowd. “The little brat!” he fumed.

Joshua laughed good-naturedly. “Lady Olivia’s full of energy, isn’t she?” He said, then, reaching into his pocket, he turned to the stallkeeper. “I’m paying. What’s the damage?”

“Thank you kindly, my lord! All counted, it comes to...ten silver!”

There was a pause. “What? Ten silver?”

“Yes, ten silver!” said the stallkeeper, holding out his hand with a sunny smile. Joshua stared blankly at the outstretched hand, then at Ashton. Ashton understood his question, so he asked the stallkeeper instead.

“Just how much did she eat?”

“How much? Why, she ate all of it. I’m closing shop for the day.” The stallkeeper beamed at them. Looking at the stall racks, Ashton saw that they were indeed empty. All that remained were a few scattered crumbs of bread. Forcing a smile, Joshua handed over the ten silver coins. Claudia watched this with a malicious grin.

Thirty minutes later, Ashton had at last apprehended Olivia. They sat down at a larger stall with chairs to sit and eat. Because Joshua was paying, every inch of the table was covered in plates of food. To make matters worse, every time one ran out, Olivia immediately ordered another, so that it seemed as though the table would never be clear.

Joshua didn’t touch any of the food. He looked like a shell of himself as he stared emptily up at the sky.

Olivia, perhaps aware after all that she’d gone too far, looked sheepish. “Look, I’m in the middle of a growth spurt, so I have to eat a lot,” she said.

“Don’t use that as an excuse. Aren’t you big enough already?” Ashton scolded.

“What part of me is big?” Olivia inquired, halfway through raising her spoon.

“What part...?” Ashton’s eyes went unbidden to her chest. Right away, he felt a crushing wave of pressure. Full of apprehension, he shifted his gaze to one

side to see Claudia looking at him with a cold smile.

“The major and I are about the same,” she remarked. “Which is to say, big, I suppose.”

“Um, yes.” Ashton nodded emphatically, not touching on her deliberate vagueness. He could feel sweat dripping down his neck. Just as he was finding it hard to breathe, Joshua seemed to suddenly remember something.

“Lady Olivia, I wonder if you had any plans after lunch?” He asked.

“Huh? Nope, not really.”

“I’m very glad to hear that. I was wondering if you’d fight a bout with me.”

“A bout?” Olivia repeated. “Sure. You did buy me lunch, after all. I’ll make sure to go easy on you, so I don’t kill you.”

“Your consideration is appreciated. And Lady Claudia,” he added casually, taking a sip of his tea, “it seems rather vulgar to draw one’s sword in a place like this.” Ashton looked at Claudia and saw her blade was halfway out of its scabbard. The conversation had happened so quickly, he was struggling to keep up.

“Lieutenant Claudia! Please settle down! As for you, Lord Joshua, I’d like an explanation I can understand for why you want to fight Olivia.”

“Shut up, Ashton!” Claudia snapped, glaring at Joshua with murder in her eyes. “He’s shown his hand at last. What are you? An imperial spy?”

Joshua, an imperial spy? This just gets more and more confusing. As if in mockery of Ashton’s confusion, the conversation only grew murkier.

“I’m sorry to disappoint you, but I have nothing to do with the empire,” Joshua replied. “On the contrary, you wouldn’t be amiss in calling it our shared enemy. Besides, what spy would openly sit here eating lunch with you?” Joshua made a fair point, which Claudia took with a stormy expression. Only Olivia continued eating as though nothing were amiss.

“And on top of that,” he continued, growing serious, “anyone with your skills ought to be able to tell that you can’t beat me, no matter what you do.” Ashton remembered Gile telling him that a strong fighter could read the caliber of their

opponent just by how they held themselves.

The blood drained from Claudia's face. Her desire to attack Joshua was so strong Ashton felt his flesh prickling. "Why don't you try me, then?" she said, further exposing her blade.

The stallkeeper, noticing the dicey situation unfolding between the two of them, began to close up shop in a mad rush. Others around them had noticed the atmosphere of impending violence, but went around as if they hadn't, fearing the consequences of getting involved.

Olivia let out a sigh of happiness. "That was absolutely delicious," she said happily, and the tension evaporated. She stood up and stretched, then went to Claudia, whose hand was still on her sword, and patted her on the shoulder. "I'll be back soon, okay?"

"Major..." Claudia said. She moved to follow Olivia, but the other girl stopped her.

"I'll be fine without you. You too, Ashton." She turned to Joshua. "Shall we go?"

Joshua looked at her for a moment, then said, "Yes," and off the two of them went. Ashton stared after them in a daze, then turned to Claudia, whose sword was now back in its scabbard, and said, "Are we going after them?"

"Don't even think about it," Claudia said. "Didn't you hear the major say we weren't to go?" The bitterness was plain on her face. In truth, she probably wanted to run after them right now. Ashton felt the same, but he knew Olivia had the senses of a wild animal. No matter how sneaky they were, she'd notice them right away.

"Who is that man, anyway?" Ashton wondered. "From what he said, we know he's not an enemy, but other than that..."

Claudia didn't reply. She just kept staring after Olivia and Joshua.

V

Johann led Olivia to an area of grassland near the city. Though flat, it was

surrounded by a good number of rocky crags and trees. He stopped and turned to Olivia as she hummed to herself.

“Out here, we can make a commotion without bothering anyone. I know I said it once before, but I am most sincerely grateful to you for acquiescing to my unreasonable request.”

“No problem. Like I said, you did buy me lunch,” Olivia said. “By the way, you don’t have to talk so stiffly. It makes me uncomfortable.” She shrugged apologetically.

“I appreciate that,” Johann said at length. “Honestly, I’m not used to having to be so formal. I usually only talk like that with particular people. Now, as I said back at the stall, I’m not from the Imperial Army, whatever Claudia’s suspicions.”

“I don’t suspect you,” Olivia said, straight-faced. “I think you’re probably from Mekia, right?”

Johann felt his heart leap in his chest as Olivia suddenly said the name of his homeland. But he forced the feeling down, keeping his expression cool.

“Why do you say Mekia?”

“The smell.”

“*Smell?*” Johann echoed. Without thinking, he sniffed himself and caught a faint whiff of perfume.

“Before I joined the Royal Army, I traveled with a human from the Holy Land of Mekia,” Olivia explained. “They smelled a bit like you do.”

Johann couldn’t just accept that. If she could really identify him by smell, she would have to have a nose as good as a wild beast’s.

“You’re very odd,” he said.

“Huh. Anyway, shall we do this? Claudia and Ashton are waiting for me, plus there are other stalls I want to look around.”

“You’re going to eat even more?” Johann asked in disbelief.

“I’m in a growth spurt!” Olivia puffed her chest up, and Johann chuckled.

“You did say that, didn’t you? You really are odd.” With that, he drew the sword at his waist. Olivia mirrored him, drawing her own. Already, black mist was coiling around the tip of the blade.

“There it is...” Johann murmured, “So that’s the famous sword. It’s even more sinister in real life. The perfect weapon for the one they call the Death God.”

Olivia giggled. “Isn’t it great? I’m not giving it to you, no matter how much you stare at it. It’s very, very precious to me.” She held the ebony blade to her breast, like a loving mother cradling her child.

“I’m not interested in depriving anyone of the things they care about,” Johann said. “Now, I know how powerful you are, so you’ll forgive me for not going easy on you.”

“Sure. You know I’ll go easy on you,” Olivia said. With that, Johann kicked off the ground. Olivia didn’t raise her sword, nor did she shift into a fighting stance.

She must be confident she can respond to anything I hit her with... he thought. All right, I won’t hold back. Keeping close to the ground, he shot past her, thrusting up with his sword. Its thin blade allowed him to strike lightning fast. Olivia twisted to one side to dodge it, then channeled the angular momentum into a strike of her own. Johann evaded by drawing back. Then he stepped in again to unleash his favored technique: a chaotic flurry of piercing blows. He wanted to pin Olivia down before she could move again.

Zephyr couldn’t have been more accurate when he described her sword work as something out of a nightmare. I didn’t expect there to be such a gulf between her abilities and mine. Next to her, I might as well be a child with a practice sword.

Olivia’s movements were ever-changing and impossible to pin down. It was growing harder for Johann to catch his breath. He hadn’t been soaked in sweat like this in any battle in recent memory. Now, it was all he could do to hold Olivia off. He couldn’t find a single opening to attack, even though he’d used magecraft on himself to enhance his physical capability.

Olivia, on the other hand, was the very picture of calm. Despite how much she’d moved, there wasn’t a drop of sweat on her. As if to add insult to injury, she wore a disconcertingly alluring smile. It was clear that, just as she’d

declared, she was going easy on him.

She is dangerous after all, he thought. Sorry, Olivia, but I'm going to break your sword arm. He leapt back, and as he did so, clicked his fingers. Just as a little patch of flame ignited on Olivia's right arm, something inconceivable happened. Olivia seemed to vanish before reappearing in the same instant a little way off. She'd *dodged* the flames.

"What?!" Johann cried. The instant his feet hit the ground he clicked his finger again, then again. Every time, Olivia wove like a dancer to evade the fire. Johann had never before met anyone who could dodge this attack. For the first time, he felt fear stir within him.

"Hey, is that—" Olivia began, but Johann ignored her. He poured all of his power into his Blazelight mage circle until it glowed like a furnace. Then he swept his left arm in front of him. A row of flaming pillars burst up from the ground, surrounding Olivia in a ring of fire.

"Huh..." Olivia gazed at the ring with great interest. She didn't seem afraid at all.

You're even more dangerous than I thought. It's going to get me in hot water, but if I don't put an end to you here, I'll never get another chance. Know that I bear you no ill will. This is to build a shining future for the Holy Land of Mekia, and for the seraph. Johann pushed away the image of Olivia's smiling face that appeared in his mind, squeezing his left hand shut. The flames writhed as the ring contracted, engulfing Olivia in the raging inferno.

It's over... Johann thought, turning from the furious blaze and beginning to walk away. The news of Olivia's death would undoubtedly give the Imperial Army its momentum back. He still wanted to believe he'd made the right decision, but he knew if nothing else he had gone against Sofitia's orders. He was wracking his brain for how to explain himself when a voice came from behind him.

"Hey, that was magecraft, right?" That voice should never have spoken again. Johann whirled around and saw Olivia, swathed in rainbow light, stepping coolly out from the roiling flames.

"It can't be! You're a mage too?!" he gasped.

“Huh? I’m not a mage.”

“Then what’s that light around you?!” Johann demanded, brandishing his finger at her. It had to be the light that had protected her from the Blazelight Vortex. If not, she’d be a pile of ashes by now.

Olivia looked at her own body. “I’m doing magic, not magecraft,” she said lightly.

“Magic?! What the hell is magic?!” The phenomenon he saw in front of him could surely only be caused by some kind of magecraft. But Olivia insisted that it wasn’t. Johann had never even come across this magic that she was talking about. Sofitia’s words to him flashed through his mind. *A woman’s intuition.*

“You don’t know it?” Olivia asked.

“Of course I don’t!”

“Okay, just for you, I’ll show you so that you understand. Seeing as you bought me lunch.” With that, the light around her body vanished. Johann stared at her, waiting with bated breath for what she’d do next. Olivia raised a finger.

Huh? What’s that sound? Johann’s ears picked up a faint sound like the air was quivering. At the same time, tiny specks of light appeared around them, so many it was impossible to count them all, and all converging around Olivia’s finger. Little by little, they grew into one ball of light about the size of her fist.

“Here I go, okay?” she said, then flicked her arm to release the ball of light. It flew with terrifying speed, skimming past Johann’s cheek. Almost simultaneously, he was hit by a wave of force and heat, as though a lightning bolt had struck the ground behind him. Covering his face with his arm, he turned around and saw one of the rocky crags had been reduced to scattered dust with no trace of its original form.

“That’s magic,” Olivia indifferently as Johann stared, dumbfounded.

“I-Impossible! Raising that kind of power would drain all the mana in your body! For a mage, that means instant death! Don’t you understand that?!”



But even as he shouted it, Johann heard the contradiction in his words. Even Lara, who had vast reserves of mana, couldn't release enough to destroy a crag of such monstrous size. Yet Olivia was standing in front of him, perfectly relaxed.

"I told you, I'm not a mage. Though from what you've said, it sounds like we'll both die if we run out of mana. That's why I draw in magical essence from the air to keep my mana from running out."

"You keep your mana from running out? What is this magical essence?"

"You ask a lot of questions. You saw the blue lights before, right? That was the magical essence."

"Th-That?! I've never heard of it before! All a mage has is their own mana!" Johann shouted, his voice cracking.

Olivia nodded a few times as though she'd worked something out. "Now that you mention it, long ago Z told me there were people out there who use cheap tricks."

"You're...You're calling magecraft *a cheap trick*?!" Johann said, reeling. It felt as though Olivia had denied his whole existence.

"I mean, you don't even know what magical essence is. And that mark on your left hand? I bet unless you use that as a catalyst, you can't even use magic. You'd be helpless if I cut your arm off." Olivia laughed, but for Johann, this was no laughing matter. If what Olivia said was true, the threat she posed had just skyrocketed. His power was dependent on mana. Hers was a totally different beast. Just the thought of a barrage of balls of light like the one she'd thrown past him set every hair on his body on end. With such overwhelming power, she could potentially even take on an entire nation on her own. And that was what puzzled him.

"If you have that kind of power, why don't you attack with it? You could slaughter the whole Imperial Army without breaking a sweat."

"Z told me never to use it on humans except when my life is in danger," Olivia said.

“Z...” Johann repeated. “You said that name before. Is it this Z that taught you sorcery or whatever this is?”

“Yeah. Not just magic, but swordcraft and all kinds of other things. Z’s amazing. It knows everything,” Olivia said with real pride in her voice. It sounded like she had the deepest respect for this Z person.

“Z sounds like a good master.”

“Hmm. I wouldn’t call Z my *master*...” Olivia said. “Hey, do you want to keep going? I’m fine either way.”

“No, let’s leave things here. Like I said to Claudia before, I can’t beat you, no matter what I do—and you owls don’t do anything stupid!” he yelled for the owls who lay in wait around them. Zephyr stepped out from the shadow of one of the crags, his face pale, and immediately nodded.

Epilogue: A Spring Storm

Felix's Quarters at Fort Astora

It was the middle of the night when the candle on the table flickered. All the windows were shut tight, so there was nowhere for a draft to sneak in. Felix slowly closed the book he was reading and, without turning, called out to the person behind him.

“What can you possibly need from me at this hour? And don’t sneak in whenever you feel like it. I’ll have nothing to do with it if the guards catch you.”

“As if I’d do something so boorish. Anyway, I have news for you of the utmost urgency.”

Felix sighed, turning his chair around. “You all do everything *your* way, don’t you? Have you ever stopped to think what an inconvenience that is on everyone else?”

A middle-aged man stood in front of the door. The lower half of his face was covered by a cowl, and he was dressed entirely in black. At a glance, he looked a lot like a shimmer, but he exuded an entirely different aura. It was both thick and suffocating, and sharp as a knife—the aura particular to those who made their living as assassins.

“This is the news. We thought we had eradicated the Deep Folk, but we have recently learned of a survivor. We, the Asura, cannot allow them to live. And so I am here. You will be assisting us with this.” The man said this like it was already decided.

Felix knew that, since ancient times, the fates of the Deep Folk and the Asura had been tightly entwined, but no more than that.

“How long are you going to keep going with this?” He asked. “The contract you made with that so-called True King was hundreds of years ago. Or is this king an immortal still living out there somewhere?” Felix joked. The man’s face didn’t even twitch.

“Whether the king is alive or dead is none of our concern. For the Asura, a contract is absolute. An eternity may pass, but that will never change.”

The Asura ghosts. Privately, that was what Felix called them. They were a bunch of fanatics, passing down this obsession with killing the Deep Folk from generation to generation, all in the name of a contract.

“Well, that’s nothing to do with me,” Felix said. “In which case, if that’s all, it’s time for you to leave.” He held out a hand toward the door, but the man didn’t leave. Instead, he advanced on Felix, looking incensed.

“The blood of the proud Asura flows in your veins too,” he said. “It is very much to do with you. What is more, you are heir to our clan. Your blood is the purest of any of us. Do not think you will be allowed to do as you please, not in your position.”

“That’s just what you people decided. I don’t see any reason I should obey you. It’s hardly as if I inherited the blood of assassins because I wanted to.”

The House of Sieger was renowned for its service to the emperor across generations. That they were also descended from the league of peerless assassins known as the Asura was a fact known only by Felix, the current head of the family. His younger sister, Luna, and butler, Klau, were not aware, of course. Not even the emperor knew the truth.

“Still this conversation? We wouldn’t be asking you for help either if we could avoid it, but our target, though young, appears to possess considerable skill. You will stop whining and help us.”

“I refuse. My duties as one of the empire’s Three Generals don’t leave me time to play silly assassin games.”

“You will refuse no matter what?” the man said, his voice lowering.

“That’s what I’ve been saying this whole time,” Felix snapped back, hitting his armrest in irritation.

The man’s mouth twisted. “Your only living sister’s name is Luna, I believe? She’s very beautiful, just like you, from what I—”

“Be silent. If you say one more word, I’ll kill you where you stand.”

The candle flickered violently. As Felix's rage rose to the surface, the man leapt back, one hand on the dagger at his waist as he stared warily at him. Felix usually had a placid temperament, but it wasn't in his nature to remain calm after hearing such words about someone close to him.

"Let me make this abundantly clear," he said. "You Asura may do as you please. I have no intention of getting in your way. But if you raise a hand to my family or friends, I will kill every last one of you."

The blood drained from the man's face. He knew that Felix wasn't bluffing. He put his hand on the door. "U-Understood," he said through clenched teeth. "We don't need you. But don't interfere with us." Then, seeming to remember something, he turned.

"Was there something else?"

"Pass this on to the rest of the Three Generals. Part of this concerns them too."

"I don't want to ask, but—"

"The name of the Deep Folk survivor is Olivia Valedstorm. She's a major in Fernest's Royal Army."

Felix almost cried out in shock but forced his mouth shut. The man looked at him searchingly. "That reaction. Do you know something?"

Felix didn't just know something. After playing no small part in the downfall of the Crimson and Helios Knights, the girl they called the Death God was, without question, the Imperial Army's greatest source of anxiety.

"I have some idea," he said at length.

"Do you now..." the man said shortly, then silently slipped from the room. The Asura were totally indifferent to the fate of the empire. All they cared about was the execution of their contracts. The extent of the threat Olivia posed to the Imperial Army would be of no interest to them.

Felix heaved a deep sigh as he leaned back in his chair. *So she's a descendant of the Deep Folk...* he thought. *Now I see why she's so strong. The Seventh Legion don't look like they're going to attack Fort Astora right now, but there's*

no question I'll run into her one day. I don't want to help the Asura, but perhaps this is fate...

The Deep Folk and the Asura.

Olivia and Felix.

As though following an inevitable path, so too did their threads become intertwined.

Felix stood up from his chair and slowly pushed a window open. Just as he did so, a bolt of lightning pierced the earth and the whole room turned white. A lukewarm breeze swept through his hair.

“A spring storm...” he murmured to himself. The words melted away along with the light of the candle into ebony darkness.



Afterword

Thank you very much for purchasing Death's Daughter and the Ebony Blade Volume 3. Time flies, and already this series is on its third volume. It's thanks to all your support that I've been able to make it this far! We've just passed the midpoint of the story.

Some of you may be thinking, "We're halfway already?" (I sincerely hope so) while some of you are probably shaking your heads, thinking, "We still have halfway to go?" (definitely, even).

Given my abilities, now that I'm trying to bring this story to its conclusion while keeping it from flagging, I think that's only fair. But at the end of the day, this story is all taking place in my head, so I don't know what's going to happen next. Right now, at this moment, all I hope is that you'll continue to put up with me the rest of the way.

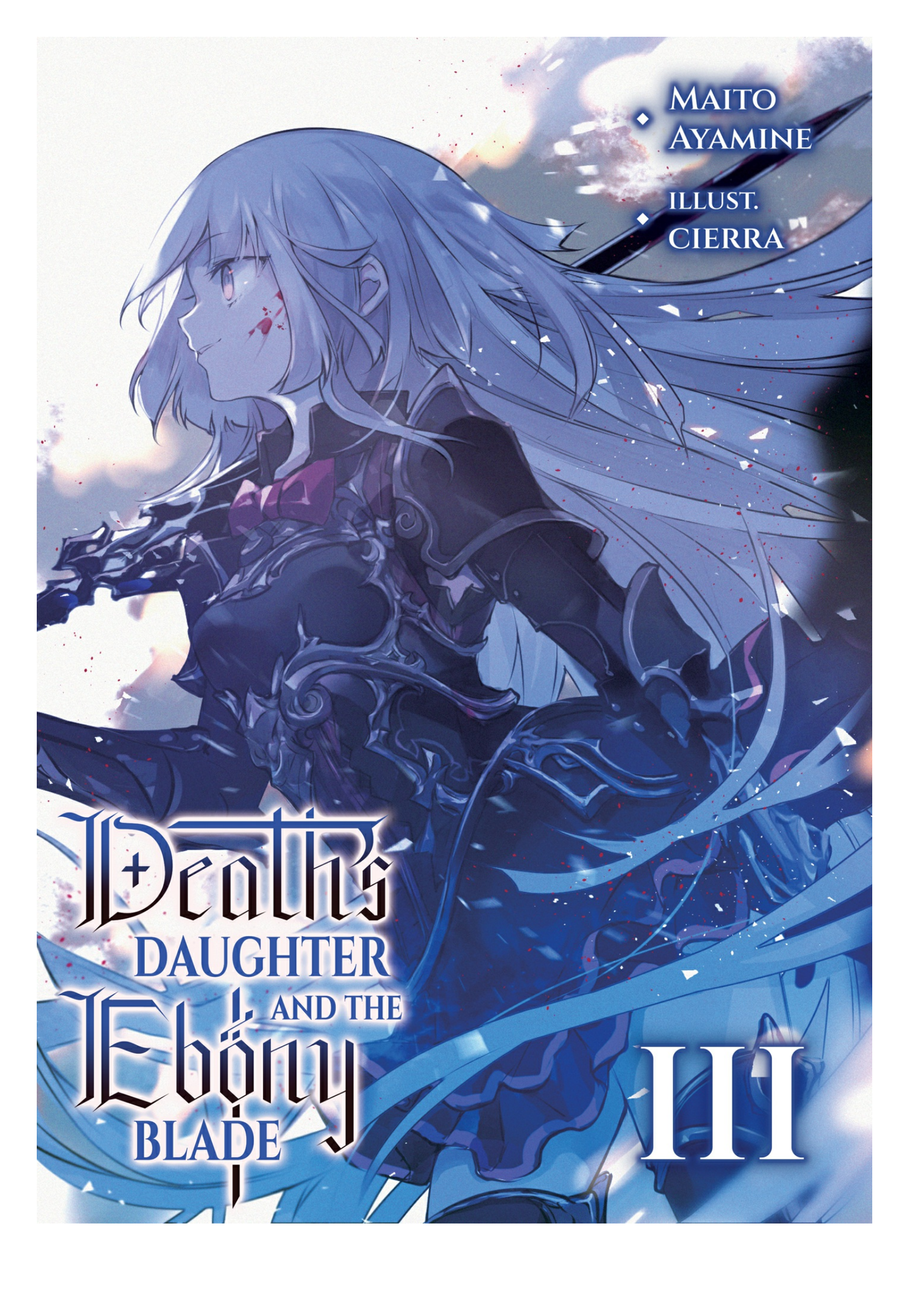
Now, let's go to the regular acknowledgments!

As those of you who already have this volume will know, Death's Daughter and the Ebony Blade is going to be adapted as a comic in Monthly Comic Dengeki Daioh!!!

Matsukaze Suiren-sensei will be in charge of the illustrations! The comic will put its own spin on the story in the novels (at least in my freewheeling imaginings), so I hope you'll all look forward to it.

Finally, a huge thank you to all of you who are reading this book.

Ayamine Maito

The background of the cover is a detailed illustration. It features a young woman with long, flowing silver hair and red eyes. She has a small, bloody wound on her right cheek and is wearing dark, ornate armor with a red bow at the collar. She holds a large, curved sword. In the background, a blue dragon is visible, and the sky is filled with clouds and falling red petals or blood. The overall color palette is dominated by blues, purples, and silvers, with red accents from the character's eyes, blood, and the dragon's wings.

◆ MAITO
AYAMINE

◆ ILLUST.
CIERRA

Death's
DAUGHTER
AND THE
Ebony
BLADE

III



Across the battlefield,
trumpets blared, and the
voices of fighting soldiers
blended together in a deep
rumbling like an earthquake.

Olivia
Valedstorm

Elaudia
Jung

All Fighting on the Central Front

Ashton
Senefelder

Johann Strider

Victory Banquet at Letitia Castle

"I don't have time to dance.
I've got loads to eat."

"Lady Olivia, would you do me
the honor of sharing a dance?"



Death's
DAUGHTER
AND THE
Ebony
BLADE

◆ MAITO
AYAMINE
◆ ILLUST.
CIERRA

III

Bonus Short Stories

A Third Day with Olivia and Ashton

The Dining Area at the Ashcrow Inn

“How’s it taste?”

“It’s all delicious!”

For the first time in a long while, Ashton was cooking, having rented out the kitchen at the Ashcroft Inn. What he cooked couldn’t go to waste, but he tended to stuff himself as he tasted everything.

And so, he had requested the presence of Olivia and her bottomless stomach.

“I knew about the mustard, but Ashton, you’re a *really* good cook,” she said, smiling at him as she popped a piece of potato into her mouth.

“I don’t know about that,” he replied, “but my mother did teach me a fair bit.”

“Your mom, huh?”

“She’d tell me, ‘Cooking’s an essential skill for Senefelder men.’ The Senefelder Company mostly trades foodstuff, so it’s not that I don’t see where she was coming from, but even so...”

“Don’t you like cooking?”

“Not back then, I didn’t. I mean, all my friends were having fun waving their wooden swords around. Of course I didn’t.”

Olivia listened as Ashton talked, chiming in from time to time to show she was paying attention while continuously reaching for more food. The contents of plate after plate disappeared into her stomach.

This isn’t competitive eating. Would it kill her to savor it a bit more? Ashton thought. Just then, he saw Claudia coming down the stairs in her nightie. Her

damp hair and pink cheeks told him she'd just come from the bath. He felt his own face growing hot.

"Whatever you're eating there looks good," Claudia said to Olivia.

"Yeah, it's amazing."

Ashton said, "Would you like some too, Lieutenant Claudia? No promises it'll be any good, though."

"You made this, Ashton?" Claudia asked, peering at the food. Ashton found himself staring directly at her chest and blushed furiously.

"Y-Yes, that's right. I hadn't cooked in a while and I suddenly felt like it."

"Huh..." Claudia said contemplatively. "Well, I'm not that hungry, but seeing as you've cooked, don't mind if I do." Taking an empty chair, she began to eat with impeccable manners.

"How is it?"

"It's very good," Claudia said. "I think you could make it as a real chef."

Ashton scratched his nose to hide his blush at this highest possible compliment from Claudia. "I'll keep it in mind as an option to look into when we're at peace again," he said.

"Good idea... Right!" Claudia leapt to her feet, pushing her sleeves up as she said, "Seeing as you've treated us to such a feast, I'd better rustle up something myself."

Ashton stared at her, taken aback by this unexpected proclamation. "You cook, Lieutenant?"

"Something strange about that?"

"Well, yes. I always thought nobles stayed out of the kitchen, as a rule."

"That's because it's usually the servants' job."

"But not you, Lieutenant Claudia?"

"You'll find there are all sorts of nobles," Claudia said, humming as she headed for the kitchen. When she was gone, Olivia stood up. She looked flustered.

“Where are you going?” Ashton asked.

“I’m, um, I’m full so I’m going back to my room.”

“You’re *full*...? I didn’t cook that much.” If this amount of food were enough to fill Olivia up, it would shatter the foundations of his world. It wouldn’t even make a good joke.

“Even so, I’m full.”

“You don’t look unwell either...” Ashton said. “Lieutenant Claudia’s going to the trouble of cooking us something. Stop being like that and have a bite of it, at least.”

Olivia slammed her fists down on the table and shouted with staggering vehemence, “Absolutely not!”

“Absolutely not...?” Ashton repeated. “You’re so weird.”

“Whatever. I’m off!” With a last glance at the kitchen as though it scared her for some reason, Olivia dashed away up the stairs as fast as her legs would carry her. Soon after, Ashton heard a door slam shut.

“What a weirdo,” he muttered.

An hour passed.

“What the...?”

Whatever had gone into the food in front of Ashton, it was beyond recognition. Even calling the blackened lumps “food” felt disrespectful. Hand trembling in apprehension, Ashton took a bite.

“Bleargh! This isn’t fit for human consumption! Even animals wouldn’t touch this!”

There was a pause. “*Ashton Senefelder.*” Claudia flashed him an absolutely top-tier smile. Ashton felt something tighten in his chest.

A Third Day with Olivia and Claudia

The Royal Capital of Fis

It was a few days after the victory banquet at Leticia Castle. Olivia was wandering through the shops nestled together in the western quarter when she noticed someone who looked conspicuously conscious of the surrounding people enter one of the shops.

That...is very obviously Claudia, Olivia thought. *Why's she wearing that hooded cloak?*

As though drawn by some mysterious force, Olivia went over to the shop. The shopkeeper greeted her as she opened the door. It only took a moment to find Claudia. The other girl didn't notice Olivia at all, apparently engrossed by something on the shelf. Peeking over her shoulder, Olivia saw a row of stuffed animals—a gray fox, a spotted rabbit, and more.

"If you want it, you should buy it," she said.

Claudia jumped so high it was almost comical. Then, with obvious trepidation, she turned around. "M-M-Major!" she exclaimed. "What are you doing here?!"

"I just happened to see you going into the shop."

"But I hid my face with the cloak..."

"You thought *that* was hiding?" Olivia said, then added, "Anyway, are you buying that?"

"Buying? Buying what?" Claudia said, cocking her head to the right with an unnatural jerk.

Olivia pointed at the shelf. "Buying the stuffed animal, of course."

"Stuffed...animal?" Claudia echoed. This time her head jerked to the left. Had she suddenly lost the ability to understand human language? Olivia wondered. It was almost funny how little Claudia seemed to understand her.

She snatched a gray fox from the shelf and thrust it under Claudia's nose.

"This! This here!"

"Do you want to buy that, Major?" Claudia asked after a pause.

"Listen! To! Me! *You* want to buy it!" Olivia said, raising her voice without meaning to. In her opinion, if you had the money for a stuffed animal, you'd be

way happier spending it on a tasty meal.

“Me? Buy a stuffed animal? I am a *knight*. If you’re trying to be funny, it’s not working.”

“You don’t want it?”

“Of course I don’t. I only came into this shop because this teacup here happened to catch my eye.” She assumed an air of erudition and, scrutinizing the teacup from multiple angles, said, “This really is a wonderful piece. Definitely eighth-century Tempus Fugit, with that pattern. A treasure.”

She seemed completely oblivious to the fact that the shopkeeper was watching her with a mix of affection and amusement.

After a moment, Olivia asked, “Are you, by any chance, still embarrassed for people to know that you like stuffed animals?”

“I-I don’t like *or* dislike them!” Claudia protested, fidgeting with the ends of her hair. “What makes you think I do, anyway?”

“Well, I mean, you reacted exactly the same way Gauss did.”

“Gauss?”

“Yeah. Gauss likes kittens.” When Olivia had run into Gauss playing with a gaggle of kittens back in the Emaleid Citadel, he’d acted just like Claudia was now. In the end, he’d admitted that he liked cats.

“*Gauss* likes *kittens*?” Claudia snickered, then caught herself. “That was impolite. Well, I wouldn’t want you thinking that I’m anything like Gauss. And if you’ll excuse me, I should be going.”

“So you’re really not going to buy it?” Olivia called as Claudia made to hurry out of the shop. The shop assistant who’d been watching them from behind the counter chimed in to let them know these were limited edition items that would never come back in stock.

Claudia’s hand was on the door. She stopped, thinking, then, making up her mind, she reached into her pocket and pulled out her purse.

“You *are* buying it.”

“I just remembered my mother wanted one.” Clearing her throat several times, Claudia handed over a gray fox toy and a silver coin to the shop assistant, who studiously avoided meeting her gaze.

“What?” she said reproachfully in response to Olivia’s stare.

“Oh, nothing.”

“I certainly hope so...” Claudia said. “I’d appreciate it if you kept today a secret. For now, *please* do not tell Ashton, under any circumstances.”

“Why don’t you want to tell Ashton? Aren’t you giving it to your mother?”

“Notwithstanding!” Claudia snatched the stuffed animal and swept from the shop like a gust of wind.

Left alone, Olivia’s eyes slid over to the shop assistant, who gave her a wry smile. “*Knights*,” they said. “They’re all about their dignity.”

From then on, the presence of a stuffed animal hidden in Claudia’s bag would be a matter of utmost secrecy.

A Day with Olivia and Cornelius

Leticia Castle in the Royal Capital of Fis

It was the morning after their triumphant return to the capital. Olivia had gone on a walk through the castle when she turned a corner in a corridor and ran into Cornelius.

“If it isn’t Major Olivia,” he said. “You’re up quite early. You must have slept well last night.”

“I did. The bed was so soft and comfy! Um, ser,” she added with a hasty salute. Cornelius smiled and returned her salute. If this had been Otto, he’d definitely have told her off right away. Whether you talked to Paul or Cornelius, the nice thing about grandpa generals was that they didn’t get hung up on formality.

Cornelius, meanwhile, ran his hand once through his white beard that reached down to his chest. Then, he asked if Olivia would take a turn with him.

Olivia, who had only been killing time until breakfast anyway, agreed without hesitation.

They walked for a while, chatting about nothing in particular when Cornelius began nodding to himself as though he were impressed.

“What’s up?” Olivia asked.

“Ah, well...” he began. “I thought that, despite seeming entirely unguarded, you are in fact so ready to meet any attack it’s astonishing.”

“Huh,” Olivia said dubiously, looking herself over. “I don’t really think about it...”

“In that case, it must be—you were raised by an individual called Z, were you not, Major?”

“Yep, that’s right!”

“Z must have been an excellent teacher.”

Olivia let out a little laugh, smiling in spite of herself. Strangely enough, hearing Z praised made her heart swell with pride.

“Oops, here we are!” Cornelius exclaimed. He stopped, looking at the great door on their left.

“The training room...?” Olivia cocked her head as Cornelius slowly opened the door. No one was training so early in the morning, of course; the space was deserted.

Cornelius took two wooden training swords that stood propped against the wall nearby then tossed one to Olivia. Olivia had no idea what was happening, but she caught the wooden sword.

“Major Olivia. Would you go a bout with me?”

“With you, Lord Cornelius? I mean, I don’t mind...” Olivia replied. “It’ll be okay so long as I do my best not to injure you, right?” Her opponent was the marshal in charge of the Royal Army. Not only that, he *was* a grandpa, after all. Even Olivia understood that she mustn’t harm this man.

Cornelius chuckled. “You’ll try not to injure me, will you? Fair enough. I *am*

over seventy years old, after all. I *would* appreciate you going easy on me.”

“Okay,” Olivia said. Cornelius, apparently enjoying himself, smiled as he raised the wooden sword to point it directly at her. Olivia was genuinely impressed. Every motion an opponent made, down to their stance, was a way to measure their skill, and Cornelius’s movements were thoroughly polished, even beautiful. That was to say, her opponent was a warrior of considerable skill. He might be a grandpa, but he clearly wasn’t called the Invincible General for nothing.

Olivia gripped her own sword, holding it at her side, and faced Cornelius.

“I’m going,” she told him.

“Any time you’re ready.”

Olivia kicked off, running in an arc to get behind Cornelius. He stayed perfectly still. She raised her sword to cleave at his side—

“Why? You could have counterattacked then.” Just before making contact, Olivia’s sword stopped. Cornelius lowered his own sword with a crooked smile.

“You mustn’t go overestimating this old man, now,” he said. “You were simply too quick. I didn’t have time to move.”

“Really?” Olivia asked.

“Really.”

Cornelius’s eyes had definitely been following her. Seeing something didn’t guarantee being able to respond to it, of course, but Olivia had caught a glimpse of something in Cornelius that made her think he was fully in control of the situation.

“Hmm. I’m not sure I understand, but oh well. Can we end the bout now?”

“I am satisfied,” Cornelius said. “I now understand exactly why the Imperial Army is so afraid of you, Major Olivia. Truly, the Royal Army has been given a treasure. Now,” he went on, “as thanks for humoring me, what do you say to breakfast together? My treat, of course.”

“Really? Yay!” Olivia exclaimed. The breakfast the leader of the Royal Army would enjoy was sure to be a feast. As Cornelius smiled gently at her, she

tugged on his arm and pulled them away from the training ground.

To Olivia's utter dismay, Cornelius's special breakfast order turned out to largely consist of vegetables.

A Day with Olivia and Blood

The Nobis Plains

The warm rays of the noonday sun bathed the land. Blood found himself lying in the grass on the plains enjoying a nap when the sound of approaching footsteps made him open his eyes. He saw a young girl, her silver hair softly rippling in the breeze as she peered at him quizzically.

"Lieutenant General Blood, what are you doing out here?"

"Oh, it's you, Liv..." Blood said. "That's, well, it's just that the sun feels so nice. It's been a while since I had a kip on the grass, so I thought I'd make the most of it."

About ten days had passed since the fighting had come to an end on the Central Front.

"Oh, I know what you mean," Olivia said. "I like napping in the grass too."

"Well, isn't that a coincidence? What do you say to lying down with me?"

"Okay!" Olivia said cheerfully. She stretched out on the grass next to Blood.

After a moment, he said, "It's no big deal, but aren't you a bit close?"

"Am I?" Olivia grinned, kicking her feet in the air. Up close, she was exquisite; she had the kind of beauty a god might create for their own amusement. As might be expected, Blood found himself unable to keep his composure.

I can't believe a girl more than a decade younger than me is making me think such things... he thought.

But as he and Olivia whiled away the time chatting about nothing in particular, he acclimatized to the situation. That is, until a throwaway remark of Olivia's set his heart pounding.

“Liv, what did you just say?” he demanded.

“Huh? I was *saying* that Captain Lise likes you.”

He digested this, then asked, “What makes you think that?”

“It’s like I was just telling you. I’m studying humans.”

“True, you *did* say that...”

Olivia had told him that until she was fifteen, she’d lived in the depths of a forest and had no contact with other people. Thinking she was joking with him, he’d let her talk without paying much attention. Oddly enough, by the time she was finished, he found himself accepting her story.

She seemed out of touch with reality, and much of her behavior showed a lack of understanding of society. At the same time, she possessed extensive knowledge—when it came to matters of war in particular, Blood had been blown away.

“The truth is, I can’t say I perfectly understand the feeling of ‘liking’ someone yet,” Olivia qualified, then launched into her explanation. It was abstract in the extreme, meaning Blood didn’t follow a lot of it. Even so, it was enough that he felt his earlobes growing uncomfortably warm.

“Okay, I get it—so you don’t need to say any more,” he said.

“Yeah? So what do you think?”

“Wh-What about me?” He heard his own stammer and felt wretched.

“Do you like Captain Lise?”

Instead of answering, Blood said, “What about *you*, Liv?”

“Me?”

“That tactician who follows you around. Warrant Officer Ashton Senefelder, that’s his name, right? You two looked mighty friendly.”

“Yeah. Ashton’s my friend and I like him,” Olivia said easily.

Blood’s heart was no more made of stone than the next man’s. Watching Olivia, he decided she didn’t harbor any romantic feelings. As if to prove him right, Olivia went on to list Claudia, then Ellis, the girl who had acted as Olivia’s

double.

“—so, General Blood,” she went on, “do you like Captain Lise?”

Apparently, his attempt to gracefully steer them away from that topic hadn’t gone well. Chafing internally, Blood replied, “I’ll leave that to your imagination, Liv.”

“Nooo, how come? Tell meee.” Olivia took the opportunity to start prodding him in the side. It tickled so badly that Blood twisted away from her, laughing—

“You seem to be greatly enjoying yourself, General Lecher,” said a voice. There, wearing a stonelike expression, stood Lise.

“How long have you been there?” he demanded

“Only since just now... Why, do you not want me here for some reason?”

“No, I didn’t say—”

Olivia cut him off. “Captain Lise!” she said, sitting up. “You’ve come at just the right moment.”

“Did you need something from me?”

“Yeah, it’s about General Blood—mmph?!”

Blood, panicking, reached out and covered Olivia’s mouth with both his hands. He swiftly whispered in her ear to not tell Lise what they’d discussed—adding, of course, that this was an order from a superior officer.

Olivia saluted, nodding vigorously.

“—so, as you can see, Captain Lise, nothing to see here. Don’t worry about it.”

“I haven’t the slightest idea what I’m supposed to be able to see,” Lise said, then added, “You and Major Olivia are getting along very well, aren’t you, General Lecher?” Her gaze was ice cold as she appraised Blood’s hands, which were still clasped over Olivia’s mouth. He hastily pulled them back.

“Oh, well. What you do is no concern of mine. More importantly, the war council is about to start, and your presence is required in the command tent.”

“I’ll be there. Just one thing, Lise, this ‘General Lecher’ thing—”

Lise said, "Please hurry, General Lecher," then without waiting for a reply, she turned on her heel, squared her shoulders, and left.

Blood and Olivia sat in silence for a time, until Olivia asked, "Should I call you General Lecher too?"

"That," Blood said at length, "is the *last* thing I need."

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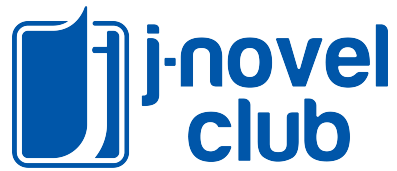
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Death's Daughter and the Ebony Blade: Volume 3

by Maito Ayamine

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